

(Alpha by Author)

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Ackerley, Joe Randolph. *Hindoo Holiday: An Indian Journal*. With an introduction by Eliot Weinberger. New York: NYRB, 2000 (1932).

As a young man in his thirties, Ackerley visits India for a protracted amount of time. This book is essentially his diary of what takes place. As out as he can be for his time, Ackerley has no problem stating his admiration for a handsome man. He is not, however, a typical British tourist. He lives the life, hiring a young man to tutor him in the language. The man turns out to be more of a pest, always conniving to extract money or favors from Ackerley, like a pesky dog begging for scraps. But Ackerley learns enough to get by. He also learns the intricacies of the Hindu religion, finding, as with Christians, that some people practice it with a certain flexibility or laxity. A still entertaining book these many decades later.

Ackerley, Joe Randolph. *My Dog Tulip*. With an introduction by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas. New York: NYRB, 1999 (1965).

A man in his sixties when he writes this book, Ackerley tells the story of his beloved Alsatian or German Shepherd, Tulip. I began the book thinking Tulip's story would be broader in context, but I was wrong. A large middle section involves Ackerley's attempts to mate Tulip properly with another Alsatian. In minute detail, and in a way that only the British can do, he writes delicately about an indelicate subject: Tulip's female parts and how they operate every time she is *on* heat (a term he deems crude but still uses it). A swelling this, and dripping that. But overall, the book is an unsentimental portrait of what according to Ackerley is an extraordinary Alsatian bitch whom he loves very much.

Athill, Diana. *Somewhere Towards the End*. New York: Norton, 2009.

Diana Athill lived to be 101 years of age. She published this book at age ninety, ninety-one. An editor for a long time, she writes here and writes convincingly of her life, not only her old age but her younger life as well: her loves and losses, her miscarriage near menopause, her decision very early on that she doesn't much care for children (though she mourns the child she loses, demonstrating a complexity of her own character). Somewhere towards the end of this thin tome, Athill states,

**So an individual life *is* interesting enough to merit examination, and my own is the only one I really know (as Jean Rhys, faced with this same worry, always used to say), and if it is to be examined, it should be examined as honestly as is possible within the examiner's inevitable limitations. To do it otherwise is pointless—and also makes very boring reading, as witness many autobiographies by celebrities of one sort or another” (181).**

Athill's longevity may, in part, be due to an active life, one in which she continues to learn how to do new things—not well or professionally, perhaps—but something novel nonetheless. One among many lessons we all might learn from her as we all slouch toward that same ending.

Barrett, Colin. *Homesickness: Stories*. New York: Grove, 2022.

This collection contains ten phenomenal stories, mostly set in Ireland. From one about a man who shoots someone in self-defense to a forty-pager about a professional soccer (futbol) player deciding what to do with his life once his career is over, these stories are vibrant with life. What do I mean? They reveal real people in real situations, often ending quietly, with barely a whimper—like most events in our own lives. Yet we recall such situations over and over again with great delight.

Batsha, Nishant. *Mother Ocean Father Nation: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2022.

I received this book by entering a goodreads.com giveaway sponsored by the publisher, Ecco (HarperCollins). A galley's edition, this book is scheduled to be released June 2022, so it may be subject to revision depending on its prepublication reception.

The novel is set in a nameless South Pacific Island in the 1980s. Said island is occupied by "Nativists" and "Indians." When a military coup occurs, putting the Nativists in power, life becomes challenging for the Indians (their ancestors plopped there several generations earlier). The natives claim that Indians have stolen all the jobs, the property that should be theirs. From the Indian perspective, they themselves have worked industriously as farmers and merchants to better their lives, and have gained a certain amount of wealth. One family is split apart, when the only daughter, Bhumi, two years into her university career on the island, must escape to the United States to begin a new life. This leaves her brother, Jaipal, and her parents behind. Their father is an alcoholic who owns his own small grocery, and their mother is a strong but quiet woman nearly worn down by her husband's abuse. Jaipal's life is complicated by the fact that he is gay, against which there exists an official stricture. If he is to meet anyone, he gathers with others of his ilk in "hotels" (largely abandoned one must assume) at night with no lights, only their widening irises as they become accustomed to the dark (nice metaphor). Bhumi's life in northern California is no picnic either. She applies for asylum with the U.S. government but will hear nothing for months and months. In the meantime, to support herself as a would-be student (she audits classes) she works as a nanny for an Indian family. Even so, the woman who hires her is condescending, and the child she must care for is a brat. She ultimately leaves. To tell how the plot is resolved would be to spoil the ending, which is a realistic yet satisfying one.

Nishant Batsha's writing is commendable, combining excellent plotting in which there is little or no coincidence; most events seem to lead by way of a natural cause and effect to the next event. His characterization is satisfying, he releasing more and more information about characters as time passes. Readers have a sense of what they look like, who they are. He tackles the subjugation of one group by another

(hinting of a genocide to come if the last 50,000 Indians do not leave the island when ordered to) with sensitivity and warmth. It provides a certain resonance for our own times, consider what Russia is doing in Ukraine, and what has happened to people of color in our own country for centuries. I wish Mr. Batsha good luck with *Mother Ocean Father Nation*. It is a new must-read.

As this edition is a galley, some errors are excusable, for ostensibly the MS has not been run through the final rounds of copy editing. That said, however, there are some that editors might wish to take a look at if they haven't already:

p. 31 – ...but it was always her...

Change to ...but it was always she...

p. 58 – Aarti pulled Bhumi off to the side, still within earshot of her parents, but far enough away to have a sidebar.

Both actions are not possible. Make clearer.

p. 61 – ...the one given to her by David in [an] act of flirtation...

Insert article “an” between “in” and “act”

p. 67 – His father sitting in the sitting room...

Unnecessary repetition of “sitting”

p. 82 – ...revealing his upper teeth, piss yellowed from a lifetime...

Delete “ed” from “yellowed”

p. 88 – ...to feel any connection ~~with~~ to the child with the serious look...

Unnecessary repetition of “with”

p. 113 – Bhumi had always been a few inches taller than her mother...

Not possible for a child “always” to have been taller than her mother. Try “For some time, Bhumi had been taller...”

p. 176 – “They’re going to make it [sugar refinery] government rum.”

Is the refinery going to be government run or is it [sugar] going to be made into government rum? Unclear.

p. 184 & 188 – On 184, Vikram’s room is described as “tidy and spartan.” Only his desk is strewn with papers and books. On 188, Vikram’s room is “messy.”

Change to “messy desk” or reconcile the seeming contradiction a different way.

p. 301 – “What if I never see you again?”

“Bhumi saw him begin to tighten up again.”

Unnecessary repetition of “again” in close proximity.

Bloom, John and Jim Atkinson. *Evidence of Love*. Austin: Texas Monthly, 1983.

This true-crime book holds a particular interest for me because I attended college with the two principals, Betty Pomeroy Gore and Allan Gore. I stood next to Allan in the a cappella choir, and Betty was born and raised in the small Kansas town where my grandparents lived. Betty and Allan married five months before my fiancée and I did, so I have some affinity for their story. On June 13, 1980, when we are all in our early thirties, Betty Gore is murdered apparently with a three-foot ax. The last person to see her alive, other than her infant daughter, is her friend Candy Montgomery. Only they aren't exactly friends any longer. According to trial records, when Candy drops by to see about the Gore's older daughter spending the night at the Montgomery house and picking up the child's swimsuit, Betty asks Candy if she is having an affair with her husband, Allan. Candy says no, but when Betty asks her if she *had* an affair with him, Candy confirms it.

The word "yes" begins their long and bizarre story. The two women talk quietly about it, Candy proclaiming that the affair has been over for eight months. This does not satisfy Betty. She leaves the room and comes back from the utility room with a big ax. Somehow the following fracas winds up in that little room. Candy claims that Betty says, "I have to kill you," and raises the ax. Candy's head and foot both receive "minor" injuries, but worse, something in Candy's subconsciousness is unleashed, a rage, and, instead of getting out of that place with her life, she finds herself in a life-and-death struggle for the ax. And when she wrangles it away, she (in echoes of Lizzie Borden) gives her friend over forty whacks—most of them while the victim's heart is still beating.

The story is fascinating, not just because I knew the Gores on a degree of separation of, say, a faded one, but it is universal to many fallen church people. All these people are good Christians, active in their local communities, and still something heinous like this can happen. After evading the police for weeks, Candy is finally confronted and charged with the murder. Her trial, in North Texas's Collin County adjacent to Dallas, is a circus of media hounds, theatrical lawyers, and one recalcitrant and tyrannical judge.

By the way, I read this book the first time it came out. Made not a mark in it. Just read it straight through to get the facts, ma'am, just the facts. This reading, I believe I felt a much stronger empathy for young parents who are dissatisfied with their apparently happy marriages, a better understanding that life is not always black and white. Though the story is over forty years old, it remains a cautionary tale for bored suburban housewives who think that a brief affair might bring them a bit of excitement to their dull lives. And perhaps it is a lesson already learned, for more women than ever are a part of the workforce, lead mostly satisfying lives of work *and* family—as much as any man. In any case, it is a story I shall not soon forget.

Byrd, Bobby, and Johnny Byrd, editors. *Lone Star Noir*. New York: Akashic, 2010.

These fourteen stories, though set in the singular locale of Texas, are about the same things that noir is about in the other forty-nine states: avarice, greed, murder. Thus, making the collection rather universal. Divided into three parts—rural Texas, urban Texas, and Gulf-Coast Texas—each story brings to life those three qualities. Noir allows readers to experience this thrilling but illicit world vicariously so that we never ever have to commit such crimes ourselves. Title is part of the Akashic Noir Series.

\*Cather, Willa. *The Professor's House*. New York: Random (Vintage), 1953 (1925).

Cather cleverly relates two stories in one by way of this novel set ostensibly near a lake in Michigan. The titular professor is nearing old age and builds a new house. However, he is still emotionally drawn to the one he and his family have lived in for decades. In this older one he maintains a study on the third floor, a place where he can separate himself from his family and do his scholarly work. He shares it with a woman, a seamstress who maintains the use of dressmaker's forms, almost like two additional people occupying the study simultaneously.

His eldest daughter is a widow remarried to a fine man, but the professor often recalls his late son-in-law, Tom Outland, because they first had worked together as student and professor. Outland, killed in World War I, is quite a scientist in his own right, and leaves a fortune to his young wife. Some feel that Outland owed some of that money to the professor and one of his colleagues for helping develop his ideas.

The second story is one long flashback, in which Tom Outland relates to readers his discovery of an ancient Indian culture, as a young man, a high on a mesa in New Mexico. Becoming acquainted with Tom in this manner, readers may wonder if Tom would have lasted with the professor's daughter, who turns out to be materialistic and superficial, hardly the companion with whom Tom might have wanted to conduct his important research.

The brief third part returns to the professor's milieu, the study in his old house, where he nearly asphyxiates himself by falling asleep with a faulty gas stove left on (in heavy winds the pilot blows out). He is rescued by the dressmaker long in his family's employ, causing him to rethink his readiness to travel to a certain beyond.

Chabon, Michael. *Wonder Boys: A Novel*. New York: Random, 2008 (1995).

This beloved novel is well worth reading whether you're a writer (or even a reader) or not. Though the protagonist is a writer/professor, his portrayal of a man seeking to become more human is probably the more interesting narrative thread. Funny, after watching the film version, I kept hearing Michael Douglas's voice whenever I read the narrator's words. Five stars from me.

Clark, Elizabeth. *My Exaggerated Life: Pat Conroy*. As Told to Katherine Clark. Columbia: U of SC P, 2018.

I don't usually care for "as told to" books, but this one is too intriguing to pass up. Clark spends a number of years communicating with author Pat Conroy either by direct interviews or by way of written communications. He declares early on that his spoken language is much different from the prose he uses in his fiction. And his fiction (for those who don't know Conroy)? *The Great Santini*. *The Lords of Discipline*. *Beach Music*, to name only a few.

Each book that Conroy writes is his way of transforming the mess that is his autobiographical material. *The Great Santini* is essentially about his bully of an abusive father who cows Conroy's mother and all his siblings. *The Lords of Discipline* is about his four years as a miserable cadet at the *Citadel*, in South Carolina. But his writing is also about his three marriages. His parents. His children. He writes, by the way, *The Water Is Wide*, the novel about a young man who teaches on an island with an all-Black classroom of children—made into a successful movie, *Conrack*, starring Jon Voight. In fact, Conroy makes a great deal of his income from selling the film rights to his works and getting a successful result—a rarity among novelists.

I am much more encouraged to read Conroy's oeuvre, in part, because I can now sense how difficult it is for him to arrive at each finished product. He is one of those persons who must fight for every minute of happiness, every inch of success, and Clark's book relates his story plainly and with great sensitivity.

Clark, Heather. *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Knopf, 2020.

This impressive biography of the famed poet may be the most comprehensive literary biography I've ever read. Clark, who took more than ten years to write this book, utilizes a broad range of sources, including Sylvia Plath's diaries, letters (some never before seen), journals, and poems. Clark also includes the story of Plath's famous poet husband, Ted Hughes. It would be like telling the story of one conjoined twin without including the other; that is how inextricably woven their lives are, right up to Plath's infamous suicide, in 1963. The acknowledgement page and Clark's notes section are filled with other sources, having visited England to conduct research as well as interviews, and having combed U.S. libraries from coast to coast. The book reads more like a novel, achieving a fiction-like narrative arc. We learn of Plath's early childhood, the loss of her father, her dominating but generous mother. We learn of Plath's education, particularly her four years at the prestigious Smith College. We learn of her creepy attempt at suicide, almost succeeding, when her near-dead body is discovered in a crawl space beneath the family home, her electroshock therapy at a draconian institution in Massachusetts. We cross the Atlantic where Plath continues her education at Cambridge University, where she meets her match intellectually as well as future husband, Ted Hughes. This narrative continues to build as we learn of her struggle to cope with a male dominated literary life in London. She is alternately elated and deflated as

some of her work is accepted with accolades and “her best work” rejected by the likes of the *New Yorker* as well as prestigious English journals. It would have been a mistake for her to eschew her British education because the Brits seem, at times, more open to her raw style than the Americans. We live through the Plath-Hughes tempestuous marriage and become acquainted with their two children. Plath’s death comes with fifty pages to go. It is the climax, all right, but it is not the end of Plath’s story. All throughout the biography Clark intersperses lines from Plath’s and Hughes’s work to demonstrate not only biographical elements but fascinating literary observations, as well. But even Plath’s death is deconstructed in such a way that we may understand it differently from earlier biographies (Anne Stevenson’s “famously negative” one, for example). With twenty-twenty hindsight, we see that Plath’s suicide (as many are) is mere minutes away from being another failed attempt. Plath is always, in the damp English climate and because she runs herself ragged, having bouts of a cold or the flu. As a result she takes a number of OTC medications, as well as a merry-go-round of prescription drugs, including antidepressants, sedatives to sleep, other drugs to wake her up so she can work—all of these interacting horribly as a perfect storm to help end her life (some experts understand that those particular antidepressants may have intensified her depression before finally kicking in). And it isn’t as if she doesn’t try to live. She consults doctors and psychiatrists galore. She corresponds with an American psychiatrist across the Atlantic. She fights like hell to stay out of British psychiatric wards because she is terrified she will be subject to shock therapy again, which she believes, has altered her brain and her life forever. For fans or nonfans alike this biography is a must-read. It generously takes all we knew about Plath before, all the research that has come earlier, and adds or even convincingly contradicts a great deal of the old. I can’t see any biographer attempting to top it for a long time to come. Indeed, the book may finally put Plath to rest alongside her grave atop a lonely spot near where her husband grew up near Heptonstall, a simple granite marker worn down now by nearly sixty years of inclement weather.

Cooke, Mervyn. *The Chronicle of Jazz*. New York: Abbeville, 1997.

An odd but enjoyable book, especially if you are a fan of jazz and want the blank spots filled in for you. The book is divided by single years or periods of years. On each double page, you will read short bios of jazz personalities. You will put it context with a sidebar of World Events. There is a plethora of stunning black-and-white photographs that document, along with the text, the first one hundred years of jazz. But for many, this book may only be the beginning of your studies.

Crawford, Phillip, Jr. *Railroaded: The Homophobic Prosecution of Brandon Woodruff for His Parents’ Murders*. Kindle: CreateSpace, 2018.

Full disclosure: I won this Kindle version of Crawford’s book by way of a goodreads.com giveaway. I am providing this review because I do believe it is a narrative worth reading.

This brief book is reminiscent of absorbing feature articles I’ve read in *Texas Monthly*—stories of true crime set in the Lone Star State. As a gay man who has

lived in Texas for over fifty years, I felt drawn to this case I'd never heard of before. Woodruff is a nineteen-year-old boy charged with murdering his parents in their home. Crawford displays a fine grasp of the tenuous legal situation for gays in Texas, and he sets up the facts of the case for readers to see that Brandon Woodruff is wrongly prosecuted and convicted. At the very least the teen should be given a fair trial. Throughout the book Crawford makes clear, among others, certain facts. A Texas Ranger from Austin is assigned the case, rather than a local or regional official. This Ranger conducts a smear campaign against Brandon because of his participation in a gay social life and for appearing in legitimate pornographic movies, "evidence" that has nothing to do with the case but which prejudices the jury. The Ranger also fails to take advantage of information that does exist, for one, cell phone records that would indicate Brandon is not anywhere near the location at the time of the murders. By such evidence alone, he could not possibly have committed the murders. While some guilty parties never show any emotion when hearing the news of loved one's murders, reliable witnesses testify that Brandon loves his parents, particularly his father, who has a sympathetic view of his son's homosexuality—and he is beset with grief from the beginning. Brandon's sister, who is more temperamentally bent toward anger and violence against their parents than Brandon, is never fully investigated. What about her whereabouts on the night of the murder? Her phone records? A party or parties who might have committed the murders on her behalf? One suspect, an ex-friend of Brandon's who is vehemently homophobic, lies to Ranger Collins, and Collins conveniently never puts the ex-buddy on the stand at the trial. The Texas Ranger takes the easy way out all around, and Brandon Woodruff, now nearing age thirty-six, still remains in prison, a long life-term ahead of him.

If readers want to help Brandon Woodruff's cause, they can go to the website [freebrandon.org](http://freebrandon.org) to donate and/or sign a petition to be sent to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. This is a wrong that must be righted and soon. Thanks to Phillip Crawford, Jr. for documenting this case in such a decisive manner.

\* Cummins, Jeanine. *American Dirt*. New York: Flatiron, 2020.

This novel, an Oprah Book Club winner, has a lot going for it. One, the novel takes readers to a dangerous place (actually many dangerous places) without having to leave their comfortable seats rooted on American soil. Next, it is well plotted. So much of fiction depends on believable coincidence, and sometimes writers stretch that credulity. But from the very beginning, Cummins lays out the plot perfectly, to the point that you say to yourself, Well, that *could* happen. Third, the author's character development is superb. One feels what it would be like to have sixteen members of your family assassinated by a notorious drug cartel, grab your young son, and head out of Mexico to *el Norte*, seeking American dirt for sanctuary. There are many bad players in this novel, but the miraculous thing is (and so true in life, as well) there are many good characters who help this woman and son to piece together a new life after tragedy. The novel is well worth the time, well worth the tears you will shed. If only our tears could translate into help for these poor migrants who flee their countries for a better life.

Davis, Jeffrey. *Tracking Wonder: Reclaiming a Life of Meaning and Possibility in a World Obsessed with Productivity*. Boulder: Sounds True, 2021.

I read this book twice. The first time, straight through without completing the exercises in a Tracking Wonder notebook I set up using a spiral (however, penciling in “NB” where there were exercises to complete). The second reading I did note the items I had marked “NB,” I completed the exercises, and I found them enormously helpful in generating renewed creativity.

My own writing had become rather stale. I couldn’t seem to get out of my rut. Davis helps readers develop a refreshed awareness of the world. Perhaps the most helpful feature that Davis generated for me is the concept of our “young genius,” the child-like persons we all were at age seven. Few rules governed us considering our creativity; we didn’t edit (poo poo) our ideas. It is this Young Genius that Davis’s book seeks to unleash in every reader (or participant in his workshops). His ideas can free that young genius inside each of us, whether we are a writer or artist or CEO or manager of a retail store. There are always more creative ways to do things or work or live our lives without worrying about being “obsessed with productivity.” A must-read for anyone who wants to freshen up their personal or professional lives.

Delony, Sheila Quinn. *This Year, Lord: Teachers’ Prayers of Blessing, Liturgy, and Lament*. USA: 2021.

Although not a pray-er myself, I find Delony’s words inspiring regarding a teacher’s life from the first day of school through the last. But she is also much more specific about her concerns. These are but a few of her chapter titles: Before Teaching a Math Lesson (and other subjects), Lunch, Reading Aloud, After Maternity Leave, and After Divorce. I wish I had had these meditative words available to me when I taught. I might have been a more patient and thoughtful teacher on the days that I clearly wasn’t. And I can say with complete assurance, that I would gladly have had Ms. Delony as my teacher when I was a child. I hope teachers everywhere will find comfort, guidance, and strength through her kind and intelligent thoughts.

\*Doty, Mark. *What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life*. New York: Norton, 2020.

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This alternately erudite and yet expressive book is enjoyable on a number of levels. If readers are acquainted with both Doty’s prose and poetry, they know that not a word is out of place or mischosen in any way. Doty’s book is divided into five parts each exploring a facet by which readers might find a way into Walt Whitman’s era, his life, and his poetry. It might be used as a textbook for teaching Whitman, at least as an ancillary source. I am now inspired to go to my shelves and reach for that volume of Whitman, whose work I have only touched the surface of. Intertwined with Doty’s exegeses of Whitman’s work are bits and pieces of Doty’s own life and how, as his title suggests, Whitman’s life and work have influenced him.

I have only one complaint, and that is with W. W. Norton. I'm not a copyeditor, and I don't look for typographical errors when I read, but at least ten jumped out at me, from subject-verb agreement to putting a space between text and an em dash to repeating two words in a row that should not be repeated. One sentence had the verb agreeing with the object of the preposition instead of the actual subject. Pages 45, 106, 115, 134, 150, 154, 174, 231, 254, 269—in case others should like to find them for themselves. These errors are not the responsibility of the author. Shame on Norton—the last independent press in America. To say the least, the company has done better.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. *A Study in Scarlet*. Kindle [ND] London: Ward Lock, 1887.

Egan, Jennifer. *The Candy House: A Novel*. New York: Scribner, 2022.

This nonlinear novel, similar to Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, is at once fascinating and thrilling, yet challenging to grasp—for me, anyway. As with a roller coaster ride, one must climb aboard and suffer whatever curves come your way. Her title seems to be derived from the following:

***Nothing is free! Only children expect otherwise, even as myths and fairy tales warn us: Rumpelstiltskin, King Midas, Hansel and Gretel. Never trust a candy house (125).***

The narrative, which begins in 2010, ventures freely into the mid-2020s and back, centers around children born in the 1980s. One Bix Bouton—akin to a real life Steve Jobs—develops a technology he dubs Own Your Unconscious which, to borrow text from the dust jacket, “allows you to access every memory you’ve ever had, and to share your own in exchange for access to the memories of others.” Like Facebook, from a slightly earlier period, OYU seduces a large portion of the world’s population into its powers. Always be careful what you wish for, Egan’s title seems to caution us, because you might not like what you ultimately wind up with. This idea of knowing all of your thoughts is just like sighting a candy house. You won’t always be able to trust what you find inside.

Eribon, Didier. *Michel Foucault*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991

Reading outside my field, I found this a challenging but rewarding study nonetheless. **“Foucault was fond of quoting René Char: ‘Develop your legitimate strangeness’”(x).** I would say that Foucault probably achieves this goal throughout his lifetime. Although he does not reveal his homosexuality until the 1960s when it is more acceptable, after he does, it becomes a part of his personal philosophy. Author Eribon briefly mentions the names of two men with whom Foucault has long-term relationships. The book is much more about his academic life than his personal life.

Foucault moves from the Communist party to becoming a mere socialist to going as far to the Left as he can in political life. No matter what university he may teach

for, he is always unapologetically political, and over time the following issues become, in France, his most targeted issues: courts, cops, hospitals and asylums, schools, military service, the press, television, and the State. His thinking on prisons is prescient for the entire world. Even in 1971, he articulates the evils of a strong police system. Even citizens-at-large who are not incarcerated are, according to Foucault, prisoners.

Over his lifetime, Foucault publishes at least a dozen books and countless articles, many translated worldwide. His work in the area of sexuality, alone, is held in high esteem. I plan now to delve into those books that are translated into English. It will be a slog.

Ferrante, Elena. *In the Margins: On the Pleasures of Reading and Writing*. Translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa, 2022 (2021).

Each chapter represents a lecture the author presents to various groups. Full of nuggets of knowledge Ferrante has mined from her own writing over the decades.

Fey, Tina. *Bossypants*. Audiobook. New York: Hachette, 2011.

If you're a fan already, you'll love this book. If not, you may become one. Fey's biting (yet gentle) wit is delightful, and readers get a lot of inside information about something most of us will never be a part of : show business. Highlights: her wedding trip to Bermuda in which the ship she and her husband are on is deemed inoperative and they must return to New York by plane (her husband loathes flying); Fey's busiest weekend ever, when she films Oprah for a *30 Rock* episode, throws a birthday party for her little daughter, and portrays (skewers) Sarah Palin for the first time on *SNL*—with the aplomb of any gifted teenager who bites off too much but manages to do all three with perfection. She even plays the audio of she and Amy Poehler playing Palin and Hillary Clinton respectively. A great audiobook for a road trip: five hours and thirty-two minutes. Those who pass you on the freeway will wonder what the hell is so funny.

Fischer, Jenna. *The Actor's Life: A Survival Guide*. With a foreword by Steve Carell. Dallas: BenBella, 2017.

I'm not an actor, but I imitated one in my youth, playing a duke in third grade, singing in a high school production of *Damn Yankees*, and marching down the aisle in college as part of the forest ranger chorus in *Little Mary Sunshine*. I loved Fischer's book because during the time it took me to read it, I realized I probably didn't have what it would have taken to become an actor. At the same time, if I had attempted such a thing, I would so have used a book like this one as a guide. Fischer addresses all the nuts and bolts of starting out: getting head shots done (professional ones, not phone pics), building a resumé, auditioning, even the machinations of how things work on a television or film set. Most of all, Fischer lets readers in on a little secret. Although the money can be great, the real joy of an actor's life is ACTING. Becoming a person other than yourself. Developing a feel for all of humanity by taking on various roles. I would add that acting may be the

most difficult of all the fine arts: memorizing lines (sometimes in a very short timeframe), bringing those lines to life in conjunction with a script and the ensemble, becoming (insofar as possible) that other person, taking direction, leaving your ego at the door, learning ancillary skills like singing, dancing, or fencing. If you wouldn't do it for free (and millions of actors do), then you probably wouldn't do it well in order to make a living. Fisher doesn't rely on her experiences alone; she peppers the pages with sidebars of advice from other actors: **"I vowed I would never do a commercial, nor would I do a soap opera—both of which I did as soon as I left the Acting Company and was starving"** (52).—Kevin Kline. And in the last section of the book, Fischer cites her interviews with four working actors, and they give, at length, their take on the profession by way of sharing with readers many more good tips. A must-read for aspiring actors and people who love Jenna Fischer (and I do) alike!

Foreman, Robert Long. *Weird Pig*. Cape Girardeau: SEMO P, 2020.

Reading this book is almost like perusing a graphic novel except, as with most reading, readers must imagine the cartoon images themselves. And it may be less scary that way, for Foreman tackles the satirizing of some tough subjects. Industrial farming, something about which a pig (if it could talk . . . and this one does) would have something to say. Creative writing and the publishing business—awash in their own absurdities. Gun violence—a germane topic right now. The character Weird Pig is basically an asshole, but for some reason, we like him and some of his antics. Why? He may give voice to some of our own discontent, some of our own worst impulses either to straighten out society or blast it all to hell. And eventually, Weird Pig does get *his* in the end, so you wouldn't want to like him too much.

Gaitskill, Mary. *Bad Behavior*. New York, Vintage, 1989 (1988).

This collection, indeed, is full of bad behavior. But aren't most of our lives touched by such deportment? Unfaithful spouses. Ungrateful children. Illicit drugs. And more. My favorite story may be the final one, "Heaven," in which Gaitskill takes material that could be the scope of a novel and compresses it into twenty-eight pages. In what seems like a *mélange* of names—it may be difficult at first to determine whose child belongs to which adult sibling—the narrator just start spilling their story. Each new development (one child runs away, one niece comes to live with the narrator) comes in short spurts, barely a paragraph at times. Yet readers do get a feeling of longevity for this family, the hurts siblings make each other suffer over time, the return of prodigal daughters who now have a more mature understanding of life. Gaitskill proves that such compression can work. Just like watching a basketball team for the first time, one does learn the names of the players and their relationships to each other, or one doesn't enjoy or fully understand the game.

Galloway, Scott. *Adrift: American in 100 Charts*. New York: Penguin, 2022.

Galloway takes complex economic problems and concepts and simplifies them so the average citizen (*cum moi*) can understand them. He does so by way of very

understandable prose, and, as he says, one hundred charts. His book is written then for two kinds of readers. And all 535 people in congress should be forced to read it. If they understood concepts like “the rise of the shareholder class” an undue “idolatry of innovators,” they might act differently. They might actually favor policies that help the middle-class and not the wealthy class, who really don’t need any additional help. Get the book. You might enjoy it!

Hammett, Dashiell. *The Thin Man*. New York: Knopf, 1965 (1934).

I admire Hammett’s treatment of dialog, perhaps rivaling or outsimplying even Hemingway’s use of it. As the novel is a mystery, a whodunit-detective story, a classic one at that, the narrative depends on such snappy patter to carry it along. Much of that dialog belongs to the famed characters Nick and Nora Charles, the couple made rich by the little woman’s sizable inheritance. Written before perhaps we learned what excessive use of alcohol can do to one’s body, this couple swills it morning, noon, and night—which may contribute to the fast talk. But then there are the swear words, as well, words we’ve come to accept in film, but not back then, when the movie version of this book comes out (you won’t hear them in those 1940s films). Hammett even employs the N word, coming out of the mouth of a salty police detective. He also manages to delve into sex with this bit of repartee between Nora and Nick:

**“Tell me something, Nick. Tell me the truth: when you were wrestling with Mimi [his ex-wife], didn’t you have an erection?”**

**“Oh, a little.”**

**She laughed and got up from the floor. “If you aren’t a disgusting old lecher,” she said. “Look, it’s daylight.”**

Oh, and the titular thin man is so thin that (I won’t spoil the ending) if you don’t pay attention to Hammett’s use of the adjective throughout, you might wonder how he arrived at that title. Enjoyed reading this master of the genre.

Hesse, Hermann. *Rosshalde*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: Bantam, 1956 (1914).

Spoiler: This novel is primarily about the death of a young child, a son named Pierre. But it is also about the death of a family, how a husband and wife drift apart and divide their love between two sons, the elder “belonging” to the wife and Pierre belonging to his father. But there isn’t much belongingness for any of the family members. The book overall is about the end of their life together at the estate called Rosshalde, an expansive property, a mansion, that seems to have a life of its own. An enchanting but sad read.

\* Highsmith, Patricia. *The Talented Mr. Ripley, Ripley Under Ground, Ripley's Game*. Knopf (Everyman's), 1999 (1955, 1970, 1974).

I don't usually read "thrillers," but Highsmith's work is at least one cut above the usual fare of that genre. She seems to portray the amoral person with great empathy and understanding. And her handling of plot seems impeccable. Mostly, these novels are to be enjoyed like a cup of tea and large bit of Danish. Bon Appétit.

Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. New York: Riverhead, 2007.

Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*, limns this portrait of two Afghanistan women that is both tragic and uplifting. Enemies at first, because they are married to the same abusive man, Mariam and Laila slowly realize their only way through life is to join together as friends. Both women are abused, one as a child, and both after their marriages. All this occurs over decades through the Soviet occupation and then the Taliban. The story ends just as the Americans enter the scene. Surprises? The landscape. One is tempted to think that the entire country of Afghanistan is as dusty and dry as the movies and news videos that emerge, but Hosseini makes clear to readers that there are wet cycles, that there exist beautiful, mountainous vistas, as well. Another surprise: how misogynistic and cruel some Afghani men are, the women's husband being a prime example. As the women toil to raise *their* children (a childless Mariam becomes a grandmother figure), they form a family structure of their own. After both suffering great losses, the story does end on a truly bright note: **"But mostly, Mariam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns" (366)**. Hosseini possesses a strong understanding of the human condition.

Hyde, George E. Hyde. *The Pawnee Indians*. With a foreword by Savoie Lottinville. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1974.

One might believe, as I did, that at one time all Native American tribes live in peace before the white race's entry into their world. That would be wrong, according to author Hyde. American tribes do not have the same strict notion of what property lines might be as European settlers. The tribes who hunt each summer go where the Bison and other game are located. Some tribes are more passive than others that are likewise more bellicose and aggressive. All tribes, including the Pawnees, have subtribal groupings. One really can't say that such and such area belongs to the Pawnees. And some tribes even enslave members of other tribes. Though, before the entry of the white race, there may be enough land for some tribes to live an easy, nearly passive and lazy life of hunting and growing crops, all is not peace and light.

The Pawnees are among these "passive" groups. The men are warriors who hunt for game in the summer—when that is over they like to live a casual life. The women take charge happily of the fields of corn and other crops. The entire tribe travels during the hunts and returns to their farm to harvest in the autumn. The Pawnee do not always have a crop when they return, it being exposed to drought or devastation by insects. Enemy tribes might take what they want and burn the rest.

Hyde presents an even-handed view of the Pawnees. They are picked on by more aggressive tribes, and they trust the government agents more than they should. Many agreements are broken or forgotten, even ones put in writing. Agents insist that the Pawnee become farmers, when it is not in their cultural thinking to do so. On the other hand men are warriors, not farmers, and they refuse to learn farming. And while the government actually supplement, say, the Sioux, one of the more bellicose tribes, they, to the chagrin of Pawnee agents, omit or forget about the Pawnee who could actually use government assistance when their traditional ways go by the wayside. In the last chapter of their existence, in the late nineteenth century, they are driven from a reservation in Nebraska by the Sioux and the government's laxity in protecting Pawnee rights, both. They migrate to the south where they join with the Wichitas. Due to disease and "war" casualties, the Pawnee are reduced to a population of 800 by 1890. To their credit and without much recognition, there are fifty-six young men of the Pawnee who serve their country in France in World War I. At the time Hyde's research ends, 1933, he believes the Roosevelt administration is finally **"pouring out funds of very kind for their assistance"** (348). One must believe that no matter how large the amount, it isn't nearly enough to pay back what the Pawnee people have lost.

As a lay reader, not a historian with the proper background, I found some of the reading slow-going, but if one is willing to plow through such an academic work, one's reward will be to learn at least a little about one of our Native American tribes.

James, Henry. *The American*. With an introduction by R. P. Blackmur. New York: Dell, 1960 (1877).

Sorry to say, but this is the first book of Henry James that I have read. I expect to read others. Set mainly in Europe, the novel concerns the American character, under much scrutiny in the nineteenth century. Briefly, Christopher Newman, thirty-six, takes great advantage of his earned wealth as a canny businessman to travel the world, beginning with Paris. He is offered the opportunity to join a financially failing aristocratic family by marrying a young widow whose first marriage was arranged by her parents. After being smitten with this woman, Newman is then *forbidden* to marry her by her mother and brother. It may or may not have anything to do with a deep dark family secret. But the rest of the narrative is more or less how Newman comes to terms with not getting what he wants, having his heart broken, as we say.

The book's language seems fresh, even now, almost 150 years after publication. James reverts to no clichés. His narration is a rich mixture of the American, the British, and French idiom. His characters' names seem symbolic but not obvious: Newman (from a *new* country); Mrs. Bread (a servant who spends a lifetime nurturing the woman Newman is to marry); Bellegarde (*nice guard*, the family "guarding" their wealth, their name, their history). James may depend a bit too much on coincidence, in that often a character who has disappeared for a number of chapters seems to appear out of nowhere, particularly, when Newman leaves Paris for London and there runs into a young woman and her father who are

present in the early part of the novel. This incident *could* occur, but it seems unlikely, yet as readers we buy it by way of the author's convincing method. Although Newman is brash, he's brash in his own manner, not being subject to stereotype, and his character does become transformed throughout the novel. By observing the best and worst of European and American cultures, he comes to see himself lodged in a larger context. He accepts the fact that with regard to this one event, losing his fiancée to a convent, he cannot control his life. Wealth means little, an ineffective salve for his eternal ache.

James, Henry. "The Pupil." Logan IA: Perfection, ND.

This long story is published by the Perfection Form company with the adolescent student in mind. However, I believe it might be one of those stories that said persons would groan at having to read. Even though the narrative, at first, might be intriguing: a young British man is hired to tutor a boy from a patrician and assumed to be wealthy family—a boy who also suffers a vague sort of poor health (later assumed to be heart trouble). The text is peppered with French phrases and other foreign terms—appropriate enough for this family pursues long holidays in France and Italy, Venice particularly—but perhaps a bit confounding to the typical public school student. Yet, as time passes, the tutor must nearly beg to collect the agreed upon pay, and the young boy is quite aware of his parents' treatment of the tutor: it evidently has happened before. The most satisfying part of the story may be that the tutor and boy do establish a warm and trusting relationship, setting up quite a dilemma for the tutor. *Do I stay, or do I go?*

Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. With an Afterword by Mark Schorer. New York: New American Library, 1961 (1922).

Americans always want more; it is the hunger, always the yearning for more material gain that capitalism engenders. At least, that is what Lewis would have us believe by way of this novel that is now one hundred years old. And yet, despite certain gewgaws that have disappeared and been replaced with more modern ones, the book might have been written yesterday. It's uncanny how little about consumerism and capitalism have changed, except that the sickness Lewis identifies may have become worse. But George Babbitt's search for acceptance and his desire to conform to society's ways in order to gain that acceptance may have changed. Church attendance has steadily declined in the last one hundred years; so has the ubiquity of the two major political parties. Maybe the burnished hard shell of capitalism is cracking, but to be replaced with what? Stick around for the next hundred to see what happens?

Manrique, Jaime, ed. With Jesse Dorris. *Bésame Mucho: New Gay Latino Fiction*. New York: Painted Leaf, 1999.

On my shelf for a long time, I finally took this collection down and enjoyed most of the stories very much. Among the best, I believe, are Manrique's "Señoritas in Love," "What's Up, Father Infante?" a gripping story by Miguel Falquez-Certain, and "Ruby Díaz" by Al Luján. The entire collection blends together a beautiful

chorus of gay Latino voices, from South America to New York to California. So much that the non-Latino community has to learn what gay Latino men face with regard to their families, their communities, and their relationship to the Roman Catholic Church. They face immense pressures to conform to cultural norms, even more so than the Anglo population, I would dare say. Kudos to these men for sharing their stories by way of lively and enlightening fiction. It never dates.

\* McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian: Or The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage, 1985.

It might be that McCarthy brings to fruition that which Hemingway and Fitzgerald could not—due not only to publishing constraints concerning swear words and graphic violence but also the reins the authors may have held tight on themselves. The makings of complete literary honesty were there via Hemingway's forthright sentences, at times extended to paragraph length (with little inner punctuation) and Fitzgerald's fortitude in portraying the brutality of capitalism's clutches on early twentieth-century America. But in this novel, McCarthy returns to the latter half of the nineteenth century of the West to extend his page-long sentences lyrically to rival the two authors mentioned before. And he does so in a way that somewhat softens the inherent mayhem of this novel.

At first, I had some difficulty in following the plot: that a sixteen-year-old Tennessean (the kid) ventures to the Southwest to see what's in store for him there. The kid is tough, though, and becomes tougher as time passes. He joins a band of men who seek to scorch the earth of natives and anybody else with dark skin (the N word, due to Twain's use of it in his books, seems to be used without restraint by these characters). But as the book shifts from one episode of killing to another across this physical and moral wasteland, I sense that the narrative is largely impressionistic. I am reminded of Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*—the wildly episodic nature of war—for that's what this book is about, the White Man's war to tame the West and all its human and animal critters. Other than superficial features, the characters, as such, show little traditional development, but that may be McCarthy's intent. These killers act as a single body, it would seem. In fact, little tolerance for the individual exists here. You act with the others, or you are fighting for your own life. And as an impressionistic work can be dreamlike in which a figure returns to you dream after dream, these characters keep running into each other, regardless of the miles and days or months between them. They can't seem to remove themselves, if they should desire to, from this wanton way of life or death. And in most cases, it is the latter that guides them through their days heading toward McCarthy's oft-cited orange sunset or that blood meridian.

McGuane, Thomas. *Gallatin Canyon: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 2006.

Ten stories—some powerful, some subtle, and some that are both—which are stimulating, to say the least. In one of my favorites, "Ice," McGuane establishes a thin connection between a coach's wife and the school's drum major, but enough to realize what the illicit situation is. "North Coast" is a strangely positive story about using drugs. And "The Refugee"—a fifty-seven-pager—seems to be about a man on

drugs who takes his own sailboat (sans motor) across the Gulf of Mexico in search of a woman he used to know in Key West. If you're a landlubber like me, there may be a bit too much technical argot as he encounters rough seas in every regard, but it certainly reads authentically. McGuane's ten stories and their characters seem to hail from all regions of the country before that one dip into the Caribbean, and every one of them rings true with a certain sophistication of Americans whether they live in Montana or Massachusetts. You just can't fool a local.

Moore, Joseph E. *Murder on Maryland's Eastern Shore: Race, Politics and the Case of Orphan Jones*. Charleston: History P, 2006.

What could have been an engrossing book about an African-American man living on Maryland's eastern shore, who murders his employer and family in 1932, seems to read more like an attorney's brief—at least in some respects. That said, Moore seems to be interested in the case because it hits close to home:

**The Green Davis homesite has long since vanished, replaced by a trailer park on what is now a side road on the way to Ocean City . . . I spent some time in the home during my high school years in the 1950s, totally unaware that I was attending a party in the locale of [what would become] the most sensational crime in the history of my native Worcester County (208).**

And the facts of the case *are* interesting, if brief. Though Orphan Jones (this sad alias for Euel Lee) readily confesses to the murder (found verbatim in Appendix 1), claiming Mr. Davis never harmed him, that he was a nice man, but that Orphan was drunk and lost control of his senses and stole a few dollars from his boss in conjunction with the murders. Usually, in a true crime book, there exists some element of mystery, but because of Jones's immediate confession, the mystery vanishes. The book is more about Jones's two trials and the attorneys who attempt to get him hanged, and the man who attempts to save Jones, in spite of his obvious guilt—a long two-year period.

There are, to me, some elements to the book that mar Moore's telling of this story. One, though the book is over 250 pages, it packs a lot of information by way of what seems like a much smaller than normal-sized font. He also sites great swaths of contemporary newspaper accounts, as well as letters—in italics—instead of, in places, summarizing material and quoting only the most salient parts of those documents. Instead of writing a book that might hold the interest of a broad range of people (Jim Crow politics, racist judges and attitudes, early twentieth-century history at its worst), Moore seems to have penned a book that interests only him and the few individuals whom it might, after seventy years, inspire, out of curiosity to pick up and read.

Even so, if readers are willing to wade through the book, they may indeed find the contents quite engaging.

Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams*. New York: Faber, 1986.

Moore may be too clever by half (for me, at least). I've enjoyed her other works, am, in fact, a big fan. But I found this novel tedious. And perhaps that is her point to make. Benna, a nightclub singer, is lonely. Lonely in Fitchville, a New York suburb (like Apex City is a suburb in an Edith Wharton novel). Because she is lonely Benna makes up a best friend, Eleanor. Only, I don't realize Eleanor is imaginary at first. Eleanor suddenly materializes on the page, with no background (*we were college friends, taught together*, etc.). I miss the clue! Same with Benna's make-believe daughter, Georgianna (George). Stupid me. Benna has riotous times with these two characters, but some of the humor is only (on purpose?) sophomorically clever—a couple of degrees removed from being a cliché. Most distracting to me, at times, is Moore's habit of using speech attributions that are not close to being a synonym for "speak" (I'm paraphrasing): "she grinned," "she shrugged." My reading comes to a halt when I see errors (at best a flaunting of conventions) like that. Anything redeeming about the novel escapes me. I stop reading, and wonder, *Does Faber even staff a copyeditor?*

Mosley, Walter. *The Man in My Basement: A Novel*. New York: Little, 2004.

A short but expansive novel with this premise: An odd little White man seeks out a Black man, Charles Blakey, because he has a large basement that is also windowless and contains only one door. Anniston Bennet's proposition is this: that Charles will lock Anniston up in his basement for a certain amount of time. In return Charles will receive a large sum of money. Charles says no at first, but he reconsiders. Charles has inherited his two-hundred-year-old home, but it is his only asset. He's never worked hard or steadily, in fact, has been fired from a bank for embezzling a small sum of money—thus being blackballed by the rest of the town. So Charles does agree to house the little man in his basement, basically serving as Bennet's master. What follows is a much deeper story than what may think in the beginning. To say more would indeed spoil the read about how these two men come to terms with their pasts.

Nava, Michael. *The City of Palaces: A Novel*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014.

"The City of Palaces" is a nickname for Mexico City. This historical novel is rich with Mexico's troubled yet textured history but rich also with carefully drawn characterizations, as well. Nava's clear prose conveys not only an elegance difficult to match but also conveys the nuanced difficulties of human relationships. In Book 1, "The Palace of the Gaviláns," (1897-1899) readers learn of an aristocratic dwelling that is now 300 years old; with its antique condition yet filled with significance for its family, it plays a substantial part throughout the novel, almost always a haven from violence or disruption. Readers learn of the love of a man for a woman whose looks are marred by a childhood bout with small pox. Even so, their respect for one another and their common interests allow them to marry. Their love deepens over time, spurred on by a strong sexual attraction for each other. They have one son, José, whose sensitive reflections and interests become a primary focus of the novel.

In Book 2, “The Apostle of Freedom,” (1909-1911), the novel skips through time to when the boy, José, is almost a teen. It is a time of political turmoil, as one man attempts to win the presidency by being in favor of democratic freedoms. Jose’s parents, his father an MD, his mother a volunteer nurse for the poor, work to support this man and help to get him elected. It is only the beginning of more trouble.

Book 3, “Tragic Days,” (1912-1913), unfurls the turmoil that occurs when this new president is ousted by force after a short while, thus altering the history of Mexico forever. Overall, the novel is a fine examination of this period of Mexican history, its difficulties with the indigenous populations (Aztecs being one), its lack of care for the poor, and its Spanish colonial and cultural traditions—a proud people whom Americans should know and care more about. By way of this story set prior to the Mexican revolution, readers have much to learn about our neighbors to the south.

Olson, Lynne. *Last Hope Island: Britain, Occupied Europe, and the Brotherhood That Helped Turn the Tide of War*. New York: Random, 2017.

This book ostensibly is about the United Kingdom and its role in World War II, but its story is so inextricably woven with the war on the continent, as well as U.S. involvement, that it becomes a much larger tale. Author Olson writes history in an absorbing fashion by doing two things. She, of course, follows and reports the facts (spending ten years writing this book), but she also unfurls the story with a narrative flair sometimes missing from history books. She achieves the latter by developing major and minor characters so that they are three-dimensional. For example, with regard to some major players—Belgium, Holland, France, and Norway—she helps readers become acquainted with both the strengths and weaknesses of its leaders: Queen Wilhelmina of Holland, Leopold III of Belgium, de Gaulle of France—as they take refuge in London for the duration. While relating the story of Nazi cruelty and the utter depravity of war, Olson stops to tell “little” stories: that one Czech citizen, Madlenka Korbek, one day grows up to be Madeleine Albright. That fifteen-year-old Audrey Kathleen Ruston, living with her mother in Arnhem, Holland, the site of a major conflict, is so emaciated at the end of World War II that she barely weighs ninety pounds. Nutrition will always be a problem for the girl who is to become actor Audrey Hepburn. Olson quotes Hepburn: **“I still feel sick when I remember the scenes . . . . It was human misery at its starkest—masses of refugees on the move, some carrying their dead, babies born on the roadside, hundreds collapsing with hunger” (387)**. These are the sorts of details that make this book a pleasure to read. One other thread is particularly poignant, that of Brigadier General John Hackett, “Shan,” originally from Australia but serving the UK. He is paratrooper who is shot down and injured as part of the Arnhem conflict. He is taken in by three Dutch unmarried sisters—Ann, Mien, and Cor de Nooij—and nursed back to health for many months until he can return to England. He is so moved by their love and care and their courage that in years to come, he returns to Arnhem again and again; likewise, he and his wife open their home to the sisters in the UK for future visits. They become family. This chapter is titled “I Was a Stranger and You Took Me In.” It is just one of the many moving stories interlaced

with the UK's status as the "last hope island" of the war. I'm delighted I found time to read this book.

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Choke*. New York: Random, 2001.

An odd but enjoyable novel. Victor Mancini, in order to pay for his mother's expensive stay in a nursing facility for Alzheimer patients, "earns" money by pretending to choke in expensive restaurants. Many of the persons who "save" him (everyone knows the Heimlich) somehow feel they must send him money. In a real choking situation it would seem as if the "savee" would feel indebted to the person who saved him and pull out a checkbook. As I said, odd (what am I missing?). Otherwise, the book is a fine satire of American life. When not visiting his mother, Victor attends sexual addiction workshops (modeled after AA, rule #4, i.e. make amends with everyone you've ever offended), albeit to pick up women. His day job is to work in a colonial theme park replete with period costumes, where he works with a good friend, Denny. Palahniuk's structure may seem loose to the reader, but it's really quite tight, a fine layering and fitting together of the novel's plot points. A fun but also serious read—not really aging over the two decades since publication.

\* Patchett, Ann. *The Dutch House: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2019.

If readers want to ascertain the entire plot of this novel, they can consult Wikipedia; it's otherwise too complex and contains too many spoilers. Danny Conroy, who happens to have graduated high school and college the same years I did, narrates this engrossing but compressed epic about him and his sister, Maeve (in my head I keep seeing the beautiful Maeve character created by Emma Mackey in TV's *Sex Education*). The brother and sister experience a sort of orphanhood when first their biological mother leaves them as young children—to serve as a missionary in India. They experience it again when their father dies and their truly wicked stepmother banishes them from their home, the Dutch House of Elkins Park, Philadelphia—the home built in 1920 and probably serving as the central character of the book. Both times, the siblings must serve as parents to each other because they simply have no one else (except for three kind servants who have no legal authority). This intimacy is both helpful and harmful to them: Maeve never marries, and Danny's wife always feels she's competing for Danny's attention. Danny's role as narrator is similar to the role that Nick Carraway takes in *The Great Gatsby*, except that Danny's account is more or less reliable, marred perhaps only by depending on his childhood memories which, in many cases, are distorted by the hurt of abandonment. In all, the novel is a satisfying read, worthy of its nomination for a Pulitzer. It is one of those you could sit up all night reading and fall asleep in the morning quite satisfied, book clutched to your chest.

Peery, William, Ed. *21 Texas Short Stories*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1954.

These twenty-one stories written by Texans (either by birth or by successful transplantation) were published between the early 1940s and the mid-1950s. But many of them chronicle earlier times, calling to mind rural-agrarian, nineteenth century Texas, calling to mind Texas's involvement in the Civil War and slavery.

Editor Peery features some famous names: O. Henry, Katherine Anne Porter, J. Frank Dobie, and Fred Gipson. But he also includes many fine writers who do not possess that kind of fame. Margaret Cousins, for example, may write the best, non-sentimental Christmas story I've ever read. "Uncle Edgar and the Reluctant Saint" tells the tale of a little girl who almost doesn't get to celebrate Christmas with her family due to her train getting stuck in a freakish Texas snow storm. Her curmudgeon of an uncle happens to be on the train, a man who detests marriage, Christmas, and almost everything else part of civilization. He manages to come through for her and everyone else on the train without changing his character too much. All the stories reveal diction and dialog that are no longer used (probably), sort of Huck Finn meets the Texas State Fair. Worth the time, especially if you are interested in Texicana.

Pellegrino, Charles. *Her Name, Titanic: The Untold Story of the Sinking and Finding of the Unsinkable Ship*. New York: McGraw, 1988.

I've been a fan of the *Titanic's* story since I was a child. I read every magazine article, every book I could find on the subject—even as an adult I collected books. I watched every film, fiction or documentary. This book, though dated now in some ways, does combine two strands: 1) the eyewitness details left behind by those who were there to witness the sinking: passengers, crew members, children—always the more interesting narrative, to me. Pellegrino also unveils the thread of how oceanographer Robert Ballard locates the *Titanic's* remains and visits them in a, for the time (1987), innovative "submarine" equipped with cameras. The most astounding part of Ballard's story seems to be that he is so overcome with emotion on seeing the pristine quality of certain artifacts left behind—china, passenger shoes, and other memorabilia—that he has no desire to lift any of it for souvenirs. Rather, he disguises the exact GPS location from journalists and the world, so that the site might remain what it has been since it all came to rest in the icy North Atlantic floor in 1912, and that is a place of memorial. Of course, other parties do locate the ship and make a commercial venture of it, but Ballard's stance must be the higher ground, in a manner of speaking.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. With a biographical note by Lois Ames. Drawings by Sylvia Plath. New York: Bantam, 1971.

This is my third reading of the novel. I first read it in my twenties, again in my forties, and now as an old man—and after having read Heather Clark's recent comprehensive literary biography, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*. *The Bell Jar* may be one of the most perfect studies of how one's biography can be manipulated to produce a novel: the stunted writing career (by way of internship) working for a women's magazine; the descent into depression and almost successful suicide; a primitive form of electroshock therapy while in an asylum; more (but gentler) shock therapy; the return to a normal life. Much like Plath's own life. Yet from reading Clark's biography, I can see that though models for characters have been plucked from Plath's life, she has, of course, changed names (Dick Newton to Buddy Willard), constructed composites, and in many cases exaggerated the person's characteristics for the sake of drama. The first half of

the novel is full of youthful, piercing witticisms only an intelligent woman could make. I still find that half refreshing. The second half, in which the protagonist, Esther, deals with her depression and treatment, is more difficult, but nonetheless inviting. One gets to descend into mental darkness with Esther without having experience it oneself. Plath, it turns out, may have been a half an hour from living, after her own second attempt at suicide. What a treat for the world it would have been to read more lively, intelligent novels like this one. More poetry.

Price, Reynolds. *The Promise of Rest*. New York: Scribner, 1995.

Price has created what, at times, seems like a tedious novel. And frankly, in one sense it is. The story of a young man suffering a slow death, from AIDS, is both tedious and yet breathlessly fleeting. Millions of lovers (in the parlance of that era) and family members (those who didn't shrink from caring) *in real life* have experienced the same tedium that Price re-creates here, and yet once you begin the journey of Wade's slow demise, you don't want to leave him behind. Even though this story is over twenty-five years old, it seems transcendent, timeless. Wade's mother and father who've separated. His lover, Wyatt, who kills himself. Wyatt's sister, Ivory, her quiet yet affirming love for Wade. All of Wade's aunts and uncles. Secrets! Oh, my, this novel is loaded with them, none of which I shall divulge, but all of them are woven together to create a narrative marking an era that has never really ended—merely shunted aside.

Proulx, Annie. *The Shipping News*. New York: Simon, 1993.

This book has remained on my shelf, unread, for far too long! I can't say much that others haven't already proclaimed. *The Shipping News* is a National Book Award winner and bestseller. It is every inch Newfoundland. Each chapter begins with an epigraph taken from *The Ashley Book of Knots*, a tome of nautical knots and their purposes, each one illustrative in some way of the chapter content. Chapter One, "Quoyle," tells readers that a quoyle is a coil of rope, also the given name of the main character, Quoyle (his last name). After Quoyle's first wife, an unfaithful free spirit, gets her karmic comeuppance by dying in a car accident along with her current paramour, Quoyle takes his two young daughters, leaving the U.S., and returns to the island of his ancestors, Newfoundland. His aunt, a single woman, joins them to help rebuild their lives and hers—in an ancestral house that once was drug across the ice to its present location. No matter how bad the climate may be where you live, Proulx demonstrates that living on that near Artic island is probably worse. And yet there are those who never leave unless it is by way of the sea or the stone cold ground. Be glad you can live this wooly life vicariously through Annie Proulx.

Quinn, Anthony. *Freya*. New York: Europa, 2017.

This novel, full of twists and turns, could perhaps, only have been written by a Brit—someone trained in reading and writing wordsmithing-worthy work. The plotting is superb. Characterization sparkling. Quinn gives readers the proper clues, subtle though they may be, and astute readers store them away and can say (or not),

*I knew it. I knew it was him.* Two young women, the titular Freya and Nancy, meet at Oxford during WWII and develop a lasting friendship. But it is not an easy alliance. They both date the same Oxford boy who eventually marries his second choice of the two, Nancy. Freya realizes he is a scoundrel, but her friend can't see it, not at first. There is a pattern of betrayal among these three characters, each deception crescendoing into a climax that may blow your bobby socks off. Spoiler: Only one false note seems to prevail and that is Freya, in the end, realizes she loves her friend, not in a platonic manner, but as a lover. This does not come out of nowhere; Quinn does subtly, perhaps too subtly, drop breadcrumb clues along the way, but there seems to be no inner struggle for Freya, no clues to the character herself that she could be a lesbian. Others might argue that the author does inform. After all, Freya puts career ahead of all; she wishes not to marry (while having lots of sex with men) or have children; she blasts off into her life in any direction she wants with little regard for family or friends. She only has one other physical relationship with a woman, and it is in the context of a drunken orgy in which any woman might have sex with another woman. Again, very subtle. And perhaps it is as it should be. The period is late 1940s to late 1960s, a time of awakening, an explorative era in which women, even adventurous ones like Freya, may not know who they are inside and must be whacked up the side of the head by life itself to understand who they are.

Robertson, Cara. *The Trial of Lizzie Borden: A True Story*. New York: Simon, 2019.

If most readers are like me, what they know about one historical figure, Lizzie Borden, can be summed up in the following ditty:

Lizzie Borden took an ax,  
Gave her mother forty whacks,  
When she saw what she had done,  
She gave her father forty-one.

After reading Robertson's book, I see that there is so much wrong with this rhyming escapade. One, *if* Lizzie Borden did kill her *step*mother and father, Borden was never proven guilty. The actual perpetrator whacked Mrs. Borden only nineteen times. And certainly Mr. Borden did not receive forty-one chops. I had always assumed that Lizzie Borden was convicted and had served time in prison. But no.

This book takes readers through the entire trial process beginning with a detailed description of the murder scene. Briefly, someone axes Mrs. Borden and then an hour and a half later, when Mr. Borden has returned to the house, someone axes him downstairs as he's napping on a sofa. The police investigators, lacking obvious clues, begin to suspect Lizzie, who remains almost preternaturally calm throughout the initial investigation, neither crying nor showing any sign of agitation, as Robertson writes (33). Andrew Jennings, Lizzie's counsel, addresses the jury: **"your task is not to unravel the mystery.' Instead, he said they must ask themselves: 'Have they [the prosecution] furnished the proof, the proof that the law requires, that Lizzie Andrew Borden did it, and that there is absolutely no opportunity for anybody else?'"** (208). And throughout the past one hundred years there has existed

such a great desire, on the part of some, to solve the mystery.

Near the end, Robertson summarizes these various interpretations that begin in the 1950s. For example, there is **“the widely held speculation, which gained currency in the early 1990s, that Lizzie Borden committed the murders after enduring years of sexual abuse by her father [she was thirty-two]. The bedrooms that opened onto each other, the dead mother, the powerless stepmother, the special understanding between father and daughter symbolized by the ‘thin gold band’—all crystalized into a suddenly obvious solution, a solution that seemed to explain not only the identity of the killer but also the very brutality of the crimes” (284).**

In any case, Robertson’s thorough research (some eighty pages of Notes) and lightly treading interpretation make for a fascinating read, particularly if you are a true crime fan, as I am. The book abounds with photographs, as well, mostly provided by the Fall River, Massachusetts, Historical Society.

Sacks, Oliver. *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*. New York: Vintage, 2007.c

This book describes the many gifts and favors that music visits upon the human brain, from “normal” people to those afflicted with debilitating conditions or diseases. Music can have miraculous effects on all our lives!

Saunders, George. *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life*. New York: Random, 2021.

Saunders, if this book is any representation, is a talented teacher of writing. His brilliance as a writer always intimidates me a bit; I’m not sure I understand his own fiction all that well. However, here, as he examines seven stories of Russian writers Chekhov, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Turgenev, Saunders makes very clear through illustration and fine contemplation what it means to construct a solid story. And I use that word deliberately because for Saunders writing a short story is about *constructing* a work of art.

I can’t reveal everything he covers, but I can mention several concepts that struck me as being essential. If the reader is a novice writer, you can learn much (bring your pencil). If you’ve written lots of stories, perhaps Saunders’s ideas will be a refresher course for you or bring to light elements you’ve not considered before now.

One, Saunders is concerned with cause and effect. Each action in a story should be the result of some other action. Why is this character doing this or that? Second, he contends that escalation is paramount—what may cause one to keep reading is that the stakes go up. Each major event should, in a cause-and-effect manner, escalate the story, fire it up, move it along. Third, he makes a simple list of major events for each story, demonstrating to himself how each may lead to the next. Of course, his ideas are not all about plotting; he’s ultimately concerned with the characters and why they act the way they do so that readers may get to the human heart of the story. A must-read for fiction writers.

\* Sedgwick, John. *From the River to the Sea: The Untold Story of the Railroad War That Made the West*. New York: Avid, 2021.

If you've ever driven on an Interstate highway in the western United States—at posted speeds of 80 mph or faster, and people *do* zoom faster—it can seem as if you're passing through a Disneyland sort of panorama. Mountains. Red arches. The occasional evergreen—with your AC cranked down low. In John Sedgwick's book, however, one learns what it was like to traverse that terrain as a railroad builder, including the workers themselves. He traces the lives and work of two men—Strong erecting the Santa Fe and Palmer, the Rio Grande—who make “river to the sea” travel possible beginning in the late 1880s. This journey includes side trips by way of chapters devoted, for example, to the beloved Harvey House hotels, the first chain of its kind to provide bed, beverage, and breakfast along the way. Always, however, Sedgwick returns to the struggle these two men mount against the elements, terrain, and government (state and federal) but mostly against each other, to open up the West to the established civilization in the East. It is quite a ride, and Sedgwick ensures that you do not miss a minute of it.

Schumacher, Michael. *Francis Ford Coppola: A Filmmaker's Life*. New York: Crown, 1999.

If readers are fans of both film and director Coppola, this book is an embarrassment of riches—at least as far as it takes us, through 1998 when the book comes out. One may not realize, for example, how easy the 1970s seem for Coppola, succeeding beyond his wildest dreams with *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*. The next twenty years are more arduous, and Coppola loses his credibility at times. He wishes to be more of an *artiste*, making films that appeal to him but perhaps not the public at large—or the studios. Even when he makes a big-budget, mass-appeal film, he is almost always at loggerheads with studio execs over scripts and, of course, money. He is a creative man, who also finances, for a time, his own studio, and even publishes a literary magazine, *Zoetrope: All Story*, which still exists today—not to mention a number of other enterprises including a winery. He ends the nineties having made enough money to dig himself out of debt and establish an independent life. Although he continues to make film, it is at his own pleasure. One has to admire that.

\* Sedaris, David. *A Carnival of Snackery: Diaries (2003-2020)*. New York: Little, 2021.

Much like Sedaris's first journal, this one contains a mixture of “Dear Diary” items along with jokes people tell him, along with long anecdotes about people he knows, along with a certain political polemic (which I love), and more, like overheard conversations in public places. If I were teaching creative writing, I would lift portions of both of Sedaris's diaries to demonstrate how writers can mine their own diaries for topics or scenarios for other works.

In the early part of his first diary, Sedaris is a poor writer. In this one, he is somewhat more solvent and becoming more so all the time. Now, the man is so

busy with readings and lectures, he's always on a plane, and the airport world alone must offer up some of his richest observations. His dated entries from all around the world show a man who is interested in people, what makes them tick, what makes them say the things they do. Not that he always understands, but he is curious enough to record some of the ridiculous, confounding, or even wise things they say to him. Overheard conversations. How his day has gone, if he's at home in one of two or three dwellings he owns in England or France. How the day has gone for his husband, Hugh. Jokes. Yes, plenty of jokes people take pride in telling him at one of his readings as he is signing books.

**"A guy finds a genie who grants him three wishes, adding that everything the man gets, his wife will get double. 'Great,' the guy says, and he wishes for a big house. Then he wishes for a car. Finally, he says, 'Okay, now I want you to beat me half to death" (211).**

**"It's night, and a cop stops a car a couple of priests are riding in. 'I'm looking for two child molesters,' he says.**

**The priests think for a moment. 'We'll do it!' they say" (445).**

Sedaris's title is derived from this tidbit dated March 23, 2013, London: **Frank and Scott went to an Indian restaurant the other night and took a picture of the menu, which offered what is called "a carnival of snackery" (289).** Indeed, that's what this book is, and the delightful thing is it doesn't cost you one calorie to consume!

Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. New York: Random, 1988.

One might wonder how the story of a single man might also tell the complete story of a war that that man participates in. Yet that is precisely what the late journalist and author Neil Sheehan does in his award-winning book, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. John Paul Vann might be a larger-than-life character if indeed he were a larger-than-life person. He is not. And Sheehan takes great pains to explain to readers Vann's poverty-stricken childhood, one in which Vann (his adopted name) is born out of wedlock and would rather take the name of his stepfather than the name of the father who brings shame upon him (although he does become acquainted with the man later). Vann begins his wannabee *life* by earning a good education. He is always about self-improvement as far as his career is concerned and seeks more degrees even while working full time. At a personal level, Vann remains a mess for the remainder of his life. His early poverty, the rejection of him by his mother, always plays a role in his judgment.

John Paul Vann commits a crime he ultimately gets away with (he does no jail time) because his wife testifies on his behalf and because he *teaches* himself to beat the military's polygraph machine—another blemish on his larger-than-life image. Yet the existence of this trial dogs him as he attempts to climb the military ladder of success via the back door (certainly not West point). Vann places career before his wife and children. He allows his voracious sexual appetite (as many as three acts of coitus a day in his forties) commands him to do whatever necessary to satisfy it: lie, cheat,

manipulate. He all but divorces his wife (and children) to accommodate his promiscuity, keeping secret from each other the lives of his Vietnamese lover and (illegal) wife.

Yet all the while Vann possesses an honest and accurate perception of the Vietnam War beginning early on in the 1950s. He perceives that the U.S. military complex, since its recent victories with World War II, develops an arrogance that keeps its leadership from assessing the Vietnam War honestly. Army leaders refuse to learn anything about Vietnam: its centuries-long battles to fight off (successfully) foreign invaders. It refuses to realize that South Vietnam government is weak and corrupt and as such never fights the North with full force. It refuses to realize that the Vietnam people are one and that often the enemy looks like the ally and vice-versa.

The Battle of Ap Bac, in 1962, is one in which everything that can go wrong does go wrong—the American Army losing hundreds of lives in spite of its military “superiority.” The Viet Cong (North Vietnam Communists) capture abandoned U.S. equipment, expensive weaponry, and use them against the South supported by the U.S. military. Military leaders fail to realize Vietnam is one country, that it cannot be divided as North Korea was. The people pass back and forth over the imagined line of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel undetected. Vann ultimately believes that how Vietnam determines its future ought to be up to its people, a struggle that, even if it turns to Communism, is not the business of the United States. There is no such thing as the so-called Domino Theory. The lives and money being spent for nearly two decades are a wasted expense, to say the least.

And yet, Vann, up until the very last of his career, continues to believe that with his superior leadership, the war can be won—even after the Tet Offensive and other failures. In June 1972, unable to obtain the service of his usual helicopter pilot, Vann makes an ill-advised night flight in fog with an inexperienced twenty-six-year-old pilot and all occupants crash to their deaths, Vann believing until the end that he has won the war. It will not end, of course, for several more years, in 1975, when the U.S. finally admits defeat and vacates the decimated country.

Smith, Zadie. *Swing Time*. New York: Penguin, 2016.

I often make marginal notes throughout a novel I read, but I allowed this one to wash over me instead, primarily because I couldn't put it down. *Swing Time* is, in part, a showbiz novel because the narrator, following college, gains employment as a personal assistant for an American pop star ten years her senior, the single-named Aimee. But first readers must learn of this nameless narrator's early life in London in which her best friend (at the time) is also biracial (her mother black, her father white, whereas the situation is reversed for her friend, Tracey). She and Tracey meet in dance class, and Tracey's “pig nose” is highlighted numerous times in the beginning so that one never forgets what Tracey is like, both her looks and her demeanor. She is a slovenly, take-no-prisoners, strong-willed female whom the narrator admires, at least to a point. Though Tracey winds up with the “real” career in show business as a dancer, it is the narrator who, for a decade, at least, derives some status by way of a well-paid and exciting career. The novel makes a big leap

when the setting moves from the UK to Africa, where pop star Aimee decides to build a school for children. The narrator is then dragged into a milieu for which she is unprepared. I admire the way in which Smith seamlessly advances the novel with a back-and-forth movement from era to era, from location to location, chapter by chapter, until readers arrive once again at the present day (2018) of cell phones and social media, phenomena lacking during the girls' childhoods of the early 1980s. The narrator commits one great sin involving her boss, Aimee, and loses her job. She then returns to London to catch up with her mother, a feminist, who has never been the nurturer her father was. A great read that explores contemporary treatment of race, fame, family, and friendship.

\* Snyder, George. *On Wings of Affection*. Independently published, Lulu: 2011.

Sparks, Muriel. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1999 (1961).

If one has seen only the movie version of this book, a fine work in its own right that premiered in 1969 with the inimitable Maggie Smith starring in the main role, one might be lulled into thinking the book to be quite similar. One would be wrong. This short novel set in 1930s Edinburgh, Scotland, impresses me as being an extended prose poem about an intelligent and nonconformist teacher who is yet rather naïve. Brodie eschews the prescribed school curriculum to lecture her female pupils concerning a wide variety of cultural and artistic topics, and yet when she also embraces the likes of fascist leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler, she reflects either a certain naivete or an intellectual dullness. The word “prime” or phrases containing that word appears more than thirty times throughout these brief pages; the phrase “crème de la crème” more than five. Both have a rather fatuous ring to them, “prime” referencing Miss Brodie’s heightened sense of her own refinement and knowledge, and “crème de la crème” indicating the girls she has rather commandeered to follow her—not just for the year they are in her class but for their entire lifetimes: they are the “Brodie set.” Spark’s structure is an omnisciently meandering one in which she may speak of one child in her adult future, one dying prematurely, another becoming a nun. Very lightly Sparks inserts that the year is 1931 or 1937 or that Ms. Brodie is now forty-three. One knows where one is at all times as if the novel were a sort of hologram. Young Sandy is the only pupil who sees through Jean Brodie’s ways, and early on readers learn that she will bring Brodie down. In the last scene of the film, a wounded Brodie who has been released from her teaching position because of Sandy’s actions screams the word “Assassin!” after her beloved Sandy, but the book ends rather quietly when readers visit Sandy upon her adult position in a nunnery. When asked about her childhood influences, she simply says, **“There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime”** (137).

Strout, Elizabeth. *Amy and Isabelle*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

I regret that this, Strout’s first book, is my most recent one read, after having perused five other Strout books previously. The novel is indeed a tour de force, worthy of premiering a writing career. In it Strout tells the story of titular characters

Amy and Isabelle, daughter and mother respectively. It is one of the hottest summers on record in Shirley Falls, a New England town in the 1970s. The site's yellowing river exudes a strong Sulphur smell. No one has air conditioning, and everyone is hot all the time, in every dwelling whether it is at home or at work. Years before Isabelle has come to Shirley Falls with a baby in her arms. Her husband has died, she tells everyone. Now Amy is seventeen, and her mother is youngish, in her thirties. Readers in essence become acquainted with the entire town. All of Isabelle's co-workers in an office where she is the boss's secretary: Fat Bev and a number of other notable characters. There are Amy's school friends, particularly Stacy, who is pregnant, and, being the daughter of two mental health workers, is allowed to have her baby and give it up for adoption. The two friends share lunch each day sitting in the nearby woods and smoking a single cigarette each (Stacy hides them in a Tampon carrier kept in her school bag). They are close, yet there are secrets about themselves they never reveal to the other, things that might make one dislike the other (each fears). There is Amy's middle-aged math teacher, a bearded man, not particularly handsome, but charismatic enough to lure Amy into an illicit relationship. There is the disappearance of a girl about the girls' age from another town, a story that sends shivers up and down the backs of everyone in Shirley Falls. All of these people have ordinary but messy lives, even though the town is beset with an active church life split among a number of denominations. Even so, an undercurrent of unease, perhaps some might say evil, brings all these souls together in a manner that keeps one reading as fast as one can. But one should not read too fast, because by doing so one can buzz by the small and delicious details that Strout plants along the way. Pregnant teenage girl. Middle-age man lovingly seducing his pupil. An ambitious mother with a dark past of her own. Oh, and several adulterous affairs. How could it be a boring narrative? And yet, the novel is not a potboiler in the traditional sense. There is no cathartic ending in which all the bad people get their comeuppance. No real heroes—except in the way that true friends can be heroic to each other. The story ends as satisfyingly quiet as it begins. Yes, after a long, hot summer, where the inhabitants of Shirley Falls are frying in the hell of their lives, the sky opens up and the heavens pour forth rain, providing at last a natural relief. Finally, the characters of Shirley Falls may breathe again. Until the next wave of heat develops.

Strout, Elizabeth. *Oh William!* New York: Random, 2021.

"Oh William!" becomes, before this novel is over, rather a poetic refrain uttered by the female narrator, Lucy Barton—a longtime figure in Strout's fiction. Lucy and William marry when they are very young, then divorce after a number of years. They both remarry, and yet both remain in the lives of the children they've brought into the world as well. Strout travels back and forth through time so seamlessly that one is never lost in or by the narrative. It turns out that Lucy, like her creator, is also a successful writer, but Lucy carries a lot of baggage with her. So does William. Poor parenting they received in developmental years. Poverty of various kinds. And it is a good thing that they remain friends because after Lucy's second husband dies and after William is left alone, they turn to each other to help the other through life's difficulties as they age into their seventies. A very affecting book by one of my favorite authors.

Stuart, Douglas. *Young Mungo: A Novel*. New York: Grove, 2022.

Think about the worst things that happen to you before you turn sixteen. None of the disasters most people experience are as bad as what young Mungo faces in his squalid life in Glasgow, Scotland. And as readers, we live it with him, the mother who both loves and neglects Mungo, the bright sister who has a chance to escape the “housing estate” where they all live in a certain squalor, the bully older brother who tries to toughen up Mungo so that he can survive this life without a father. The mother, whose intentions are not entirely clear, because she is often drunk, sends young Mungo on a weekend trip with two known sex offenders, one old and one in his twenties. This is the strand of the story that grabs our attention most perhaps. In alternating chapters, author Stuart seamlessly weaves this story with Mungo’s falling in love with a neighbor boy his age. The scenes in which they engage are some of the most authentic I believe I’ve ever read concerning adolescent love. Mungo is Protestant, and his friend James is Catholic. Their differences threaten to tear them apart at several points. Mungo’s appellation is no accident. He is named after Saint Mungo, and he is often called to the front of a classroom to read aloud about the myths of Saint Mungo. His favorite myth is the one in which Saint Mungo brings a robin back to life. It is this motif that is reflected later on in young Mungo’s own story, but I’ll let readers discover it for themselves as they devour this important novel about who the weak and the strong really are.

Summerfield, Ellen, Ed. *Bite-sized Poems: An Anthology*. Oregon: Independently Published, 2021.

This carefully curated and edited volume of poetry might be the beginning classroom teacher’s dream for teaching poetry. Summerfield, herself a poet, brings together over forty indeed brief poems (one as short as nine words but packed with meaning). Not only does she guide readers lovingly through each poem with thoughtful exegesis but she also provides at the end of each presentation references to YouTube and PBS readings of the poem or a poet’s website so that the curious persons might read on. However, not to limit the book’s appeal to an educational setting alone, it stands alone as one poet’s generous interpretation of a group of disparate but equally enchanting poems—each one a delicious chocolate lifted from the front cover of bite-sized delights: Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Bertolt Brecht, as well as Edna Kovacs and Gwendolyn Brooks, make up just a few of the poets whom she anthologizes.

Sweeney, Robert L. *Wright in Hollywood: Visions of a New Architecture*. With a foreword by David G. De Long. New York: MIT Press, 1994.

Sweeney relies a great deal on Frank Lloyd Wright’s *Autobiography* as well as other sources to tell his story. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the detail given about how Wright constructs his own cement blocks (both plain and with designs) to build houses in Los Angeles during the 1920s. The blueprints, because of their reduction in size, are difficult to read, but there are some beautiful colored plates located at the back of the book.

\*Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*. London: HarperCollins, 2003.

*The Opposite of Fate* is a joy to read, I would venture, whether you're a Tan fan or not. The celebrated author modestly shares her wisdom with readers. Wisdom derived from her childhood, the daughter of Chinese immigrants. Wisdom derived from a life marred with tragedy (family deaths, physical violence, and murder of a friend). Wisdom derived from her relationships, family and friends alike. Wisdom derived from her courage to try new things (from joining a rock band made up of other famous writers to escaping from a dangerous flood while camping near Lake Tahoe to traveling to China with her mother). Wisdom derived from her trial-and-error career in writing (as most writing careers may be). Wisdom about medicine as she suffers through a long (and undiagnosed) bout of Lyme disease. The book is composed of essays arranged in thematic sections, and some anecdotes or fragments tinkle like little bells of remembrance from one essay to the next, but you don't mind the repetition because it demonstrates how interrelated all the parts of her singular life are. I wish I'd read it when it was published, but it is still a valuable document in understanding one of our most important American authors.

Towles, Amor. *The Lincoln Highway: a Novel*. New York: Viking, 2021.

This charming novel tells of the ten-day adventure of two brothers who head out from Kansas to California to build a new life, following the death of their father and one brother's release from jail. Yet their plans are thwarted when two fellow inmates hide in the trunk of the warden's car (and hop out when the warden isn't looking). Well, from there the adventure heads east instead of west. Perhaps the most captivating character is Billy, the eight-year-old brother who is smarter than any other character in the book but also the most disarming. It is his idea to travel coast to coast from New York to California on the "historical" Lincoln Highway. And without revealing any spoilers, the two brothers do eventually get to do just that—even if that journey doesn't begin until the very last sentence.

*The Lincoln Highway* is just as fascinating, though in different ways, as Towles's previous book, *A Gentleman in Moscow*. Towles is a master at several things, all adding up to great writing. One, is characterization. Even characters with the smallest parts are developed so that readers know who they are. Second is structure. Towles's intricate scaffolding keeps readers informed of where they are at all times in the novel's unraveling, without making it too simple. By using multiple points of view, by way of a character per chapter, he, at times, overlaps the portrayal of certain scenes, from two different points of view—providing readers an interesting "truth." By the way, the ten parts begin with Part Ten and work toward Part One. All POVs are written in the third person with the exception of one, Duchess's, which may make him the main narrator though not the central character. And third, Towles's dialog—represented by way of em dashes instead of quotation marks—harks back to the fiction of an earlier period. I'm not sure why Towles does it, perhaps to do just that, make the early 1950s seem farther back than they really are. Are we to expect *Lincoln Highway II*? It wouldn't trouble me at all.

Turner, Nancy E. *These Is My Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine, 1881-1901. A Novel*. New York: Harper, 1998.

This book has remained unread on my shelf a long time, I think, in part, because I would always be put off by the apparent poverty of the title. It belies the intelligence of the narrator and story she has to tell. Set in mostly late 1880s of the Arizona Territories, the novel relates itself in the form a diary, a twenty-year period in the life of a young woman, the man she marries, their children, and almost all related family members. While the frontier adventures are exciting (some unique and some exactly like those found in earlier books), the novel may be limited by two factors. One is the author's use of first person. Readers mostly receive Sarah Prine's take on things, a bright but uneducated (for a while) youth. The other may be the form of using a diary. Both features seem to limit the amount or kind of information a novel can tell. On the other hand, the author makes good use of both methods to tell this tale of a young woman faced with many pioneer-like challenges: extremes in weather, battles with natives, sexism, childbirth, premature deaths in the family, and more. It offers a personal touch the third person might not. The diary format strengthens the female point of view which may be lost or obscured by male writers of similar historical fiction or literature. I still believe shelf appeal might have been increased by at least straightening out the grammar of the title. How about *These Are My Words*?

Von Planta, Anna, ed. *Patricia Highsmith: Her Diaries and Notebooks*. With an introduction by Joan Schenkar. New York: Liveright, 2021.

This more than fifty-year compendium of Highsmith's 8,000 pages of diary and notebook entries is a stunning read—particularly if you savor the voyeuristic practice of reading someone's private thoughts. Her diary entries are brutally honest about everything from her current girlfriend(s) with whom she is madly in love to resentments toward her mother, estranged father, and stepfather. Though bright enough to graduate from Barnard, she never quite masters the art of achieving a meaningful love relationship; her tone seems the same for fifty years. *I can't understand why this relationship has failed*. And yet, I believe she does know why: her profession requires much alone time, which is not compatible with a needy lover.

Her notebooks, on the other hand, are about her current and proposed works, sometimes a poem here and there. She also talks business. About her agent(s), once her sales go international. Her publishers. Friendships, lasting ones at that, with a broad range of writers. Strong female writers (mostly part of a lesbian group of professionals) mentor Highsmith on how to navigate the heady waters of being a single woman sometimes writing about being queer. Early on, when she is young, she has sex and "love" relationships with a few men, but none of them is every satisfying. What may be most fascinating is to watch how her life and living influence particular books. The Ripley series of five novels has such an authentic, European backdrop because besides being multilingual, Highsmith *lives* in Europe much of her life. Still, having been born in Fort Worth, Texas, she does return there to visit once her parents move back from New York. Yet she harbors deep

resentments against her abusive mother, who lives to be ninety-five (PH nearly perceives it as a punishment), and, because of her own health problems, fails to visit upon her mother's own funeral. A sad but triumphant ending for a triumphant but oft-times sad and lonely life. If readers have time, it is well worth theirs to read these 1,000 pages, especially if they're curious about the writer who authored *Strangers on a Train* and the Ripley series of five novels, a total of thirty-two books.

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. New York: Penguin, 2019.

A terse epistolary novel, this book reaches far across the globe and time: between Vietnam and Connecticut, between war and peace, between mother and son, between parental abuse and love, between two young men of vastly different backgrounds who find love with each other amid their own isolation. A lyrically charmed novel.

Wagner, Sara Moore. *Swan Wife*. San Diego: Cider Press, 2022.

These may be some of the most exciting poems, the most developed poems I've read by a contemporary poet in a long time. Wagner's structure is deliberate, appropriating certain aspects from Joseph Campbell studies to frame her collection. Sure of her technique and subject matter, Wagner ensures her poems pop with energy: they possess a natural, almost childlike quality in their enthusiasm about youthful love, marriage, having that first child. In "Licentious," my favorite passage may be:

**She tells me *come out*,**  
**someone might see me, the bounce**  
**of my breasts, this ache. I will have to marry the snake**  
**slivering into the banks, will have to marry the sun,**  
**a thick hand on my shoulders (xi).**

Wagner's title may well spring from "Ball and Chain," the moment the persona emotionally becomes the betrothed, the soon-to-be swan wife:

**I dipped my toes in and you called me swan,**  
**you said *you'll go where you want*. It was maybe then I knew you saw**  
**me, how I wanted to fly or float, to cover. How even a mute swan**  
**will hiss and attack if you get too close. How you called me beautiful**  
**then, so beautiful and so loud, the say I'd hoot up to the stars,**  
**the way I showed my teeth (7).**

The poet's persona maintains her controlled ebullience throughout the entire collection, and I hope to read more of Wagner's work. Congratulations to her for winning the 2021 *Cider Press Review* Editors' Prize Book Award. The collection is quite deserving.

Wedgwood, Barbara. *The Demon Inside*. New York: Simon, 1993.

A sad but true story. Made sadder by the fact that I attended graduate school with the two principals: Walker Railey and Margaret “Peggy” Nicolai Railey. My young wife (at the time) and I entertained them in our efficiency apartment on the campus of Southern Methodist University. I was both a seminarian where I met Walker, as well as a student of graduate music, where I studied with the same organ professor as Peggy who was enrolled in the master of music program. The couple were about to be married at the time, effervescent and fun to be with. After I left seminary, withdrawing before I graduated, I never saw them again. I only heard of them when their story hit the national news. I had left the church and divorced my wife, leaving the seminary life far behind. They were figures I no longer seemed to know.

I was aware of this book when it came out, but I was not interested in reading it at the time. Somewhat like learning about the Clutter family in the news (I grew up in Kansas), I had grown tired of hearing about whether Walker Railey had strangled his wife of ten years or not. In that she didn’t die as a result of the attempt but remained an invalid for more than twenty-five years, dying at the age of sixty-three, she remained frozen in time for me: a pretty, intelligent and gifted musician. Witty and with a mind of her own.

I read Wedgwood’s book with a wary eye when I noted in her foreword that she was a Dallasite who had grown up in the city’s First Methodist Church located downtown. Even though she’d left the area to pursue a more global career and life, I wondered how objective she might be. She also knew or seemed to know of many of the principals in the story: other Methodist ministers and spouses, Methodist bishops, and the like. But for the most part, I was impressed with her fanaticism for detail, almost too much at times (offering much more than a thumbnail sketch of minor characters, for example). All the dialogue, she claims, is lifted from **“sworn testimony, quotations from newspapers and magazines or the recollections of two observers of a scene or one of the participants in a dialogue” (xi)**. She allows for the mistaken or distorted memories of people when recalling even such a traumatic event as this one.

But one element is missing. Facts. Walker Railey consistently refused to speak with law enforcement, except briefly, all the while claiming he was innocent. And, of course, Peggy Railey could no longer speak for herself—nothing more than a drooling ghoul the strangler had created the night of the attack. One time, early in her time at the Dallas hospital, she “woke” momentarily from her coma, ostensibly upon hearing the voice of her husband standing at the foot of her bed, and seemed startled. The older child, Ryan, five, had suffered some injury, the attacker apparently pushing him away from the scene, but he was too young ever to positively identify the violent intruder. Those events may be as close as the public ever gets to knowing the truth. A strange and lurid case made markedly so because it takes place within the context of one of the country’s largest churches of one Protestantism’s most established denominations. As the title suggests, the demon remains within, within the realm of its own story, perhaps never to be set free.

\*Wharton, Edith. *The Custom of the Country*. With an introduction by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. New York: Scribner, 1997 (1913).

Wharton, portrayer of early twentieth-century America, unveils the life of one Undine Spragg who, in time, will marry three men, one of them twice. From the time Undine is a young woman, she is hard to please. She never has quite the clothes she wants, never quite associates with the people she really wishes to. And when someone, like her parents, stretch themselves to make her happy, she is far from grateful. She is like this with each of her husbands, too, the first one an apparent rube from her small New York City suburb. Then, she marries up, a handsome man who might become a poet, but because she doesn't wish to live on his small trust and make do, he must go to work. Jumping to France, she marries royalty, but even he doesn't have enough money, and she leaves him, as well. Finally, she marries the rube again (he just happens to be in France), because since the early days he has become a billionaire. And he gives her nearly everything she can dream of, including a fine home to a little son (by husband two) she has ignored since his birth nine years earlier. She attempts to goad this man into becoming an ambassador (on the book's last page), but when he tells her that she could never become an ambassador's wife because she is divorced, she is furious. Wharton ends the novel this way:

**[Undine] had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife: and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for" (509).**

Wharton's novel, some say, is prescient for its time, predicting what American society might become like. And along with Sinclair Lewis (*Babbitt*) and F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*)—whose novels are published at roughly the same time—she limns what can happen to ambitious women who have no place in society except to be some man's wife.

Wilder, Thornton. *Theophilus North*. New York: Harper, 1973.

Published two years before Wilder dies, this novel plays out in 1926, during what would have been the author's twenties. The episodic narrative is set in Newport, Rhode Island, and it seems that each chapter is composed around a different character—almost a set of linked stories. Almost. The titular character, also in his late twenties, is entranced by Newport's singular history, and he early on describes the "nine cities" he uncovers there. Having served in WWI, he now casts about for something to do with his life. He decides that he will read orally to a variety of people who need his services. And each chapter then becomes one of these adventures in reading. Probably not as structured or as profound as his earlier works, the book does seem a tribute to his youth, and it holds my attention through to the end.

Wolitzer, Hilma. *Today a Woman Went Mad in the Supermarket: Stories*. With a foreword by Elizabeth Strout. New York, Bloomsbury, 2021.

These thirteen delightful stories date from 1966 to 2020, from mid-sixties angst over the “woman’s place” to the best story I’ve yet read about the early days of the Covid pandemic. And yet, in terms of tone (humorous *and* sardonic) and theme (woman on the verge, but not, because the narrator must keep herself together), the stories all feel as if they could have been written at the same time—so unified is the writing. Wolitzer’s stories are a prose analogue to the perfect poem: they are compressed, metaphors are subtle, and each one brings pleasure that lasts.

Wouk, Herman. *Sailor and Fiddler: Reflections of a 100-year-Old Author*. New York: Simon, 2016.

The most fascinating aspect of this book may be indeed be Wouk’s age (b. May 27, 1915 and d. May 17, 2019, making him 10 days short of 104). One of the keys to his longevity may be that he never stops writing. In this slim tome, he relates the stories of each one of his books and how they come to be, but along with each one, he also shares where he is at the time. For example, while working on one novel for seven years, he and his wife buy a house in the Caribbean and reside there with their sons in paradise until he is finished. The book is a great way to become acquainted with his oeuvre if one isn’t already.

[To view entries in alpha order by author, see page 1.]

*Date Finished*

**January: 7 Titles**

1/01/22

Fischer, Jenna. *The Actor's Life: A Survival Guide*. With a foreword by Steve Carell. Dallas: BenBella, 2017.

I'm not an actor, but I imitated one in my youth, playing a duke in third grade, singing in a high school production of *Damn Yankees*, and marching down the aisle in college as part of the forest ranger chorus in *Little Mary Sunshine*. I loved Fischer's book because during the time it took me to read it, I realized I probably didn't have what it would have taken to become an actor. At the same time, if I had attempted such a thing, I would so have used a book like this one as a guide. Fischer addresses all the nuts and bolts of starting out: getting head shots done (professional ones, not phone pics), building a resumé, auditioning, even the machinations of how things work on a television or film set. Most of all, Fischer lets readers in on a little secret. Although the money can be great, the real joy of an actor's life is **ACTING**. Becoming a person other than yourself. Developing a feel for all of humanity by taking on various roles. I would add that acting may be the most difficult of all the fine arts: memorizing lines (sometimes in a very short timeframe), bringing those lines to life in conjunction with a script and the ensemble, becoming (insofar as possible) that other person, taking direction, leaving your ego at the door, learning ancillary skills like singing, dancing, or fencing. If you wouldn't do it for free (and millions of actors do), then you probably wouldn't do it well in order to make a living. Fisher doesn't rely on her experiences alone; she peppers the pages with sidebars of advice from other actors: **"I vowed I would never do a commercial, nor would I do a soap opera—both of which I did as soon as I left the Acting Company and was starving"** (52).—Kevin Kline. And in the last section of the book, Fischer cites her interviews with four working actors, and they give, at length, their take on the profession by way of sharing with readers many more good tips. A must-read for aspiring actors and people who love Jenna Fischer (and I do) alike!

1/05/22

Delony, Sheila Quinn. *This Year, Lord: Teachers' Prayers of Blessing, Liturgy, and Lament*. USA: 2021.

Although not a pray-er myself, I find Delony's words inspiring regarding a teacher's life from the first day of school through the last. But she is also much more specific about her concerns. These are but a few of her chapter titles: Before Teaching a Math Lesson (and other subjects), Lunch, Reading Aloud, After Maternity Leave, and After Divorce. I wish I had had these meditative words available to me when I taught. I might have been a more patient and thoughtful teacher on the days that I clearly wasn't. And I can say with complete assurance, that I would gladly have had Ms. Delony as my teacher when I was a child. I hope teachers everywhere will find comfort, guidance, and strength through her kind and intelligent thoughts.

1/08/22

Towles, Amor. *The Lincoln Highway: a Novel*. New York: Viking, 2021.

This charming novel tells of the ten-day adventure of two brothers who head out from Kansas to California to build a new life, following the death of their father and one brother's release from jail. Yet their plans are thwarted when two fellow inmates hide in the trunk of the warden's car (and hop out when the warden isn't looking). Well, from there the adventure heads east instead of west. Perhaps the most captivating character is Billy, the eight-year-old brother who is smarter than any other character in the book but also the most disarming. It is his idea to travel coast to coast from New York to California on the "historical" Lincoln Highway. And without revealing any spoilers, the two brothers do eventually get to do just that—even if that journey doesn't begin until the very last sentence.

*The Lincoln Highway* is just as fascinating, though in different ways, as Towles's previous book, *A Gentleman in Moscow*. Towles is a master at several things, all adding up to great writing. One, is characterization. Even characters with the smallest parts are developed so that readers know who they are. Second is structure. Towles's intricate scaffolding keeps readers informed of where they are at all times in the novel's unraveling, without making it too simple. By using multiple points of view, by way of a character per chapter, he, at times, overlaps the portrayal of certain scenes, from two different points of view—providing readers an interesting "truth." By the way, the ten parts begin with Part Ten and work toward Part One. All POVs are written in the third person with the exception of one, Duchess's, which may make him the main narrator though not the central character. And third, Towles's dialog—represented by way of em dashes instead of quotation marks—harks back to the fiction of an earlier period. I'm not sure why Towles does it, perhaps to do just that, make the early 1950s seem farther back than they really are. Are we to expect *Lincoln Highway II*? It wouldn't trouble me at all.

1/11/22

Wolitzer, Hilma. *Today a Woman Went Mad in the Supermarket: Stories*. With a foreword by Elizabeth Strout. New York, Bloomsbury, 2021.

These thirteen delightful stories date from 1966 to 2020, from mid-sixties angst over the "woman's place" to the best story I've yet read about the early days of the Covid pandemic. And yet, in terms of tone (humorous *and* sardonic) and theme (woman on the verge, but not, because the narrator must keep herself together), the stories all feel as if they could have been written at the same time—so unified is the writing. Wolitzer's stories are a prose analogue to the perfect poem: they are compressed, metaphors are subtle, and each one brings pleasure that lasts.

1/16/22]

Ackerley, Joe Randolph. *My Dog Tulip*. With an introduction by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas. New York: NYRB, 1999 (1965).

A man in his sixties when he writes this book, Ackerley tells the story of his beloved Alsatian or German Shepherd, Tulip. I began the book thinking Tulip's story

would be broader in context, but I was wrong. A large middle section involves Ackerley's attempts to mate Tulip properly with another Alsatian. In minute detail, and in a way that only the British can do, he writes delicately about an indelicate subject: Tulip's female parts and how they operate every time she is *on* heat (a term he deems crude but still uses it). A swelling this, and dripping that. But overall, the book is an unsentimental portrait of what according to Ackerley is an extraordinary Alsatian bitch whom he loves very much.

1/31/22

Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. New York: Riverhead, 2007.

Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*, limns this portrait of two Afghanistan women that is both tragic and uplifting. Enemies at first, because they are married to the same abusive man, Mariam and Laila slowly realize their only way through life is to join together as friends. Both women are abused, one as a child, and both after their marriages. All this occurs over decades through the Soviet occupation and then the Taliban. The story ends just as the Americans enter the scene. Surprises? The landscape. One is tempted to think that the entire country of Afghanistan is as dusty and dry as the movies and news videos that emerge, but Hosseini makes clear to readers that there are wet cycles, that there exist beautiful, mountainous vistas, as well. Another surprise: how misogynistic and cruel some Afghani men are, the women's husband being a prime example. As the women toil to raise *their* children (a childless Mariam becomes a grandmother figure), they form a family structure of their own. After both suffering great losses, the story does end on a truly bright note: **"But mostly, Mariam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns"** (366). Hosseini possesses a strong understanding of the human condition.

1/31/22

Schumacher, Michael. *Francis Ford Coppola: A Filmmaker's Life*. New York: Crown, 1999.

If readers are fans of both film and director Coppola, this book is an embarrassment of riches—at least as far as it takes us, through 1998 when the book comes out. One may not realize, for example, how easy the 1970s seem for Coppola, succeeding beyond his wildest dreams with *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*. The next twenty years are more arduous, and Coppola loses his credibility at times. He wishes to be more of an *artiste*, making films that appeal to him but perhaps not the public at large—or the studios. Even when he makes a big-budget, mass-appeal film, he is almost always at loggerheads with studio execs over scripts and, of course, money. He is a creative man, who also finances, for a time, his own studio, and even publishes a literary magazine, *Zoetrope: All Story*, which still exists today—not to mention a number of other enterprises including a winery. He ends the nineties having made enough money to dig himself out of debt and establish an independent life. Although he continues to make film, it is at his own pleasure. One has to admire that.

## February: 8 Titles

2/01/22

Cummins, Jeanine. *American Dirt*. New York: Flatiron, 2020.

This novel, an Oprah Book Club winner, has a lot going for it. One, the novel takes readers to a dangerous place (actually many dangerous places) without having to leave their comfortable seats rooted on American soil. Next, it is well plotted. So much of fiction depends on believable coincidence, and sometimes writers stretch that credulity. But from the very beginning, Cummins lays out the plot perfectly, to the point that you say to yourself, Well, that *could* happen. Third, the author's character development is superb. One feels what it would be like to have sixteen members of your family assassinated by a notorious drug cartel, grab your young son, and head out of Mexico to *el Norte*, seeking American dirt for sanctuary. There are many bad players in this novel, but the miraculous thing is (and so true in life, as well) there are many good characters who help this woman and son to piece together a new life after tragedy. The novel is well worth the time, well worth the tears you will shed. If only our tears could translate into help for these poor migrants who flee their countries for a better life.

2/11/22

Robertson, Cara. *The Trial of Lizzie Borden: A True Story*. New York: Simon, 2019.

If most readers are like me, what they know about one historical figure, Lizzie Borden, can be summed up in the following ditty:

Lizzie Borden took an ax,  
Gave her mother forty whacks,  
When she saw what she had done,  
She gave her father forty-one.

After reading Robertson's book, I see that there is so much wrong with this rhyming escapade. One, *if* Lizzie Borden did kill her *step*mother and father, Borden was never proven guilty. The actual perpetrator whacked Mrs. Borden only nineteen times. And certainly Mr. Borden did not receive forty-one chops. I had always assumed that Lizzie Borden was convicted and had served time in prison. But no.

This book takes readers through the entire trial process beginning with a detailed description of the murder scene. Briefly, someone axes Mrs. Borden and then an hour and a half later, when Mr. Borden has returned to the house, someone axes him downstairs as he's napping on a sofa. The police investigators, lacking obvious clues, begin to suspect Lizzie, who remains almost preternaturally calm throughout the initial investigation, neither crying nor showing any sign of agitation, as Robertson writes (33). Andrew Jennings, Lizzie's counsel, addresses the jury: **"your task is not to unravel the mystery." Instead, he said they must ask themselves: 'Have they [the prosecution] furnished the proof, the proof that the law requires, that Lizzie Andrew Borden did it, and that there is absolutely no opportunity for anybody else?'"** (208). And throughout the past one hundred years there has existed such a great desire, on the part of some, to solve the mystery.

Near the end, Robertson summarizes these various interpretations that begin in the 1950s. For example, there is “the widely held speculation, which gained currency in the early 1990s, that Lizzie Borden committed the murders after enduring years of sexual abuse by her father [she was thirty-two]. The bedrooms that opened onto each other, the dead mother, the powerless stepmother, the special understanding between father and daughter symbolized by the ‘thin gold band’—all crystalized into a suddenly obvious solution, a solution that seemed to explain not only the identity of the killer but also the very brutality of the crimes” (284).

In any case, Robertson’s thorough research (some eighty pages of Notes) and lightly treading interpretation make for a fascinating read, particularly if you are a true crime fan, as I am. The book abounds with photographs, as well, mostly provided by the Fall River, Massachusetts, Historical Society.

2/12/22

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. New York: Penguin, 2019.

A terse epistolary novel, this book reaches far across the globe and time: between Vietnam and Connecticut, between war and peace, between mother and son, between parental abuse and love, between two young men of vastly different backgrounds who find love with each other amid their own isolation. A lyrically charmed novel.

2/20/22

Manrique, Jaime, ed. With Jesse Dorris. *Bésame Mucho: New Gay Latino Fiction*. New York: Painted Leaf, 1999.

On my shelf for a long time, I finally took this collection down and enjoyed most of the stories very much. Among the best, I believe, are Manrique’s “Señoritas in Love,” “What’s Up, Father Infante?,” a gripping story by Miguel Falquez-Certain, and “Ruby Díaz” by Al Luján. The entire collection blends together a beautiful chorus of gay Latino voices, from South America to New York to California. So much that the non-Latino community has to learn what gay Latino men face with regard to their families, their communities, and their relationship to the Roman Catholic Church. They face immense pressures to conform to cultural norms, even more so than the Anglo population, I would dare say. Kudos to these men for sharing their stories by way of lively and enlightening fiction. It never dates.

2/22/22

Cooke, Mervyn. *The Chronicle of Jazz*. New York: Abbeville, 1997.

An odd but enjoyable book, especially if you are a fan of jazz and want the blank spots filled in for you. The book is divided by single years or periods of years. On each double page, you will read short bios of jazz personalities. You will put it context with a sidebar of World Events. There is a plethora of stunning black-and-white photographs that document, along with the text, the first one hundred years of jazz. But for many, this book may only be the beginning of your studies.

2/24/22

Sedgwick, John. *From the River to the Sea: The Untold Story of the Railroad War That Made the West*. New York: Avid, 2021.

If you've ever driven on an Interstate highway in the western United States—at posted speeds of 80 mph or faster, and people *do* zoom faster—it can seem as if you're passing through a Disneyland sort of panorama. Mountains. Red arches. The occasional evergreen—with your AC cranked down low. In John Sedgwick's book, however, one learns what it was like to traverse that terrain as a railroad builder, including the workers themselves. He traces the lives and work of two men—Strong erecting the Santa Fe and Palmer, the Rio Grande—who make “river to the sea” travel possible beginning in the late 1880s. This journey includes side trips by way of chapters devoted, for example, to the beloved Harvey House hotels, the first chain of its kind to provide bed, beverage, and breakfast along the way. Always, however, Sedgwick returns to the struggle these two men mount against the elements, terrain, and government (state and federal) but mostly against each other, to open up the West to the established civilization in the East. It is quite a ride, and Sedgwick ensures that you do not miss a minute of it.

2/26/22

Athill, Diana. *Somewhere Towards the End*. New York: Norton, 2009.

Diana Athill lived to be 101 years of age. She published this book at age ninety, ninety-one. An editor for a long time, she writes here and writes convincingly of her life, not only her old age but her younger life as well: her loves and losses, her miscarriage near menopause, her decision very early on that she doesn't much care for children (though she mourns the child she loses, demonstrating a complexity of her own character). Somewhere towards the end of this thin tome, Athill states,

**So an individual life *is* interesting enough to merit examination, and my own is the only one I really know (as Jean Rhys, faced with this same worry, always used to say), and if it is to be examined, it should be examined as honestly as is possible within the examiner's inevitable limitations. To do it otherwise is pointless—and also makes very boring reading, as witness many autobiographies by celebrities of one sort or another” (181).**

Athill's longevity may, in part, be due to an active life, one in which she continues to learn how to do new things—not well or professionally, perhaps—but something novel nonetheless. One among many lessons we all might learn from her as we all slouch toward that same ending.

2/27/22

Summerfield, Ellen, Ed. *Bite-sized Poems: An Anthology*. Oregon: Independently Published, 2021.

This carefully curated and edited volume of poetry might be the beginning classroom teacher's dream for teaching poetry. Summerfield, herself a poet, brings

together over forty indeed brief poems (one as short as nine words but packed with meaning). Not only does she guide readers lovingly through each poem with thoughtful exegesis but she also provides at the end of each presentation references to YouTube and PBS readings of the poem or a poet's website so that the curious persons might read on. However, not to limit the book's appeal to an educational setting alone, it stands alone as one poet's generous interpretation of a group of disparate but equally enchanting poems—each one a delicious chocolate lifted from the front cover of bite-sized delights: Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Bertolt Brecht, as well as Edna Kovacs and Gwendolyn Brooks, make up just a few of the poets whom she anthologizes.

### March: 6 Titles

3/02/22

Wouk, Herman. *Sailor and Fiddler: Reflections of a 100-year-Old Author*. New York: Simon, 2016.

The most fascinating aspect of this book may be indeed be Wouk's age (b. May 27, 1915 and d. May 17, 2019, making him 10 days short of 104). One of the keys to his longevity may be that he never stops writing. In this slim tome, he relates the stories of each one of his books and how they come to be, but along with each one, he also shares where he is at the time. For example, while working on one novel for seven years, he and his wife buy a house in the Caribbean and reside there with their sons in paradise until he is finished. The book is a great way to become acquainted with his oeuvre if one isn't already.

3/11/22

James, Henry. *The American*. With an introduction by R. P. Blackmur. New York: Dell, 1960 (1877).

Sorry to say, but this is the first book of Henry James that I have read. I expect to read others. Set mainly in Europe, the novel concerns the American character, under much scrutiny in the nineteenth century. Briefly, Christopher Newman, thirty-six, takes great advantage of his earned wealth as a canny businessman to travel the world, beginning with Paris. He is offered the opportunity to join a financially failing aristocratic family by marrying a young widow whose first marriage was arranged by her parents. After being smitten with this woman, Newman is then *forbidden* to marry her by her mother and brother. It may or may not have anything to do with a deep dark family secret. But the rest of the narrative is more or less how Newman comes to terms with not getting what he wants, having his heart broken, as we say.

The book's language seems fresh, even now, almost 150 years after publication. James reverts to no clichés. His narration is a rich mixture of the American, the British, and French idiom. His characters' names seem symbolic but not obvious: Newman (from a *new* country); Mrs. Bread (a servant who spends a lifetime nurturing the woman Newman is to marry); Bellegarde (*nice guard*, the family "guarding" their wealth, their name, their history). James may depend a bit too

much on coincidence, in that often a character who has disappeared for a number of chapters seems to appear out of nowhere, particularly, when Newman leaves Paris for London and there runs into a young woman and her father who are present in the early part of the novel. This incident *could* occur, but it seems unlikely, yet as readers we buy it by way of the author's convincing method. Although Newman is brash, he's brash in his own manner, not being subject to stereotype, and his character does become transformed throughout the novel. By observing the best and worst of European and American cultures, he comes to see himself lodged in a larger context. He accepts the fact that with regard to this one event, losing his fiancée to a convent, he cannot control his life. Wealth means little, an ineffective salve for his eternal ache.

3/16/22

Moore, Joseph E. *Murder on Maryland's Eastern Shore: Race, Politics and the Case of Orphan Jones*. Charleston: History P, 2006.

What could have been an engrossing book about an African-American man living on Maryland's eastern shore, who murders his employer and family in 1932, seems to read more like an attorney's brief—at least in some respects. That said, Moore seems to be interested in the case because it hits close to home:

**The Green Davis homesite has long since vanished, replaced by a trailer park on what is now a side road on the way to Ocean City . . . I spent some time in the home during my high school years in the 1950s, totally unaware that I was attending a party in the locale of [what would become] the most sensational crime in the history of my native Worcester County (208).**

And the facts of the case *are* interesting, if brief. Though Orphan Jones (this sad alias for Euel Lee) readily confesses to the murder (found verbatim in Appendix 1), claiming Mr. Davis never harmed him, that he was a nice man, but that Orphan was drunk and lost control of his senses and stole a few dollars from his boss in conjunction with the murders. Usually, in a true crime book, there exists some element of mystery, but because of Jones's immediate confession, the mystery vanishes. The book is more about Jones's two trials and the attorneys who attempt to get him hanged, and the man who attempts to save Jones, in spite of his obvious guilt—a long two-year period.

There are, to me, some elements to the book that mar Moore's telling of this story. One, though the book is over 250 pages, it packs a lot of information by way of what seems like a much smaller than normal-sized font. He also sites great swaths of contemporary newspaper accounts, as well as letters—in italics—instead of, in places, summarizing material and quoting only the most salient parts of those documents. Instead of writing a book that might hold the interest of a broad range of people (Jim Crow politics, racist judges and attitudes, early twentieth-century history at its worst), Moore seems to have penned a book that interests only him and the few individuals whom it might, after seventy years, inspire, out of curiosity to pick up and read.

Even so, if readers are willing to wade through the book, they may indeed find the contents quite engaging.

3/29/22

Quinn, Anthony. *Freya*. New York: Europa, 2017.

This novel, full of twists and turns, could perhaps, only have been written by a Brit—someone trained in reading and writing wordsmithing-worthy work. The plotting is superb. Characterization sparkling. Quinn gives readers the proper clues, subtle though they may be, and astute readers store them away and can say (or not), *I knew it. I knew it was him*. Two young women, the titular Freya and Nancy, meet at Oxford during WWII and develop a lasting friendship. But it is not an easy alliance. They both date the same Oxford boy who eventually marries his second choice of the two, Nancy. Freya realizes he is a scoundrel, but her friend can't see it, not at first. There is a pattern of betrayal among these three characters, each deception crescendoing into a climax that may blow your bobby socks off. Spoiler: Only one false note seems to prevail and that is Freya, in the end, realizes she loves her friend, not in a platonic manner, but as a lover. This does not come out of nowhere; Quinn does subtly, perhaps too subtly, drop breadcrumb clues along the way, but there seems to be no inner struggle for Freya, no clues to the character herself that she could be a lesbian. Others might argue that the author does inform. After all, Freya puts career ahead of all; she wishes not to marry (while having lots of sex with men) or have children; she blasts off into her life in any direction she wants with little regard for family or friends. She only has one other physical relationship with a woman, and it is in the context of a drunken orgy in which any woman might have sex with another woman. Again, very subtle. And perhaps it is as it should be. The period is late 1940s to late 1960s, a time of awakening, an explorative era in which women, even adventurous ones like Freya, may not know who they are inside and must be whacked up the side of the head by life itself to understand who they are.

3/30/22

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian: Or The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage, 1985.

It might be that McCarthy brings to fruition that which Hemingway and Fitzgerald could not—due not only to publishing constraints concerning swear words and graphic violence but also the reins the authors may have held tight on themselves. The makings of complete literary honesty were there via Hemingway's forthright sentences, at times extended to paragraph length (with little inner punctuation) and Fitzgerald's fortitude in portraying the brutality of capitalism's clutches on early twentieth-century America. But in this novel, McCarthy returns to the latter half of the nineteenth century of the West to extend his page-long sentences lyrically to rival the two authors mentioned before. And he does so in a way that somewhat softens the inherent mayhem of this novel.

At first, I had some difficulty in following the plot: that a sixteen-year-old Tennessean (the kid) ventures to the Southwest to see what's in store for him there.

The kid is tough, though, and becomes tougher as time passes. He joins a band of men who seek to scorch the earth of natives and anybody else with dark skin (the N word, due to Twain's use of it in his books, seems to be used without restraint by these characters). But as the book shifts from one episode of killing to another across this physical and moral wasteland, I sense that the narrative is largely impressionistic. I am reminded of Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*—the wildly episodic nature of war—for that's what this book is about, the White Man's war to tame the West and all its human and animal critters. Other than superficial features, the characters, as such, show little traditional development, but that may be McCarthy's intent. These killers act as a single body, it would seem. In fact, little tolerance for the individual exists here. You act with the others, or you are fighting for your own life. And as an impressionistic work can be dreamlike in which a figure returns to you dream after dream, these characters keep running into each other, regardless of the miles and days or months between them. They can't seem to remove themselves, if they should desire to, from this wanton way of life or death. And in most cases, it is the latter that guides them through their days heading toward McCarthy's oft-cited orange sunset or that blood meridian.

#### April: 5 Titles

4/08/22

Batsha, Nishant. *Mother Ocean Father Nation: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2022.

I received this book by entering a goodreads.com giveaway sponsored by the publisher, Ecco (HarperCollins). A galley's edition, this book is scheduled to be released June 2022, so it may be subject to revision depending on its prepublication reception.

The novel is set in a nameless South Pacific Island in the 1980s. Said island is occupied by "Nativists" and "Indians." When a military coup occurs, putting the Nativists in power, life becomes challenging for the Indians (their ancestors plopped there several generations earlier). The natives claim that Indians have stolen all the jobs, the property that should be theirs. From the Indian perspective, they themselves have worked industriously as farmers and merchants to better their lives, and have gained a certain amount of wealth. One family is split apart, when the only daughter, Bhumi, two years into her university career on the island, must escape to the United States to begin a new life. This leaves her brother, Jaipal, and her parents behind. Their father is an alcoholic who owns his own small grocery, and their mother is a strong but quiet woman nearly worn down by her husband's abuse. Jaipal's life is complicated by the fact that he is gay, against which there exists an official stricture. If he is to meet anyone, he gathers with others of his ilk in "hotels" (largely abandoned one must assume) at night with no lights, only their widening irises as they become accustomed to the dark (nice metaphor). Bhumi's life in northern California is no picnic either. She applies for asylum with the U.S. government but will hear nothing for months and months. In the meantime, to support herself as a would-be student (she audits classes) she works as a nanny for an Indian family. Even so, the woman who hires her is condescending, and the child she must care for is a brat. She ultimately leaves. To tell how the plot is resolved would be to spoil the ending, which is a realistic yet satisfying one.

Nishant Batsha's writing is commendable, combining excellent plotting in which there is little or no coincidence; most events seem to lead by way of a natural cause and effect to the next event. His characterization is satisfying, he releasing more and more information about characters as time passes. Readers have a sense of what they look like, who they are. He tackles the subjugation of one group by another (hinting of a genocide to come if the last 50,000 Indians do not leave the island when ordered to) with sensitivity and warmth. It provides a certain resonance for our own times, consider what Russia is doing in Ukraine, and what has happened to people of color in our own country for centuries. I wish Mr. Batsha good luck with *Mother Ocean Father Nation*. It is a new must-read.

As this edition is a galley, some errors are excusable, for ostensibly the MS has not been run through the final rounds of copy editing. That said, however, there are some that editors might wish to take a look at if they haven't already:

- p. 31 – ...but it was always her...  
Change to ...but it was always she...
- p. 58 – Aarti pulled Bhumi off to the side, still within earshot of her parents, but far enough away to have a sidebar.  
Both actions are not possible. Make clearer.
- p. 61 – ...the one given to her by David in [an] act of flirtation...  
Insert article “an” between “in” and “act”
- p. 67 – His father sitting in the sitting room...  
Unnecessary repetition of “sitting”
- p. 82 – ...revealing his upper teeth, piss yellowed from a lifetime...  
Delete “ed” from “yellowed”
- p. 88 – ...to feel any connection ~~with~~ to the child with the serious look...  
Unnecessary repetition of “with”
- p. 113 – Bhumi had always been a few inches taller than her mother...  
Not possible for a child “always” to have been taller than her mother. Try “For some time, Bhumi had been taller...”
- p. 176 – “They’re going to make it [sugar refinery] government rum.”  
Is the refinery going to be government run or is it [sugar] going to be made into government rum? Unclear.
- p. 184 & 188 – On 184, Vikram’s room is described as “tidy and spartan.” Only his desk is strewn with papers and books. On 188, Vikram’s room is “messy.”  
Change to “messy desk” or reconcile the seeming contradiction a different way.

p. 301 – “What if I never see you again?”

“Bhumi saw him begin to tighten up again.”

Unnecessary repetition of “again” in close proximity.

4/11/22

Hesse, Hermann. *Rosshalde*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: Bantam, 1956 (1914).

Spoiler: This novel is primarily about the death of a young child, a son named Pierre. But it is also about the death of a family, how a husband and wife drift apart and divide their love between two sons, the elder “belonging” to the wife and Pierre belonging to his father. But there isn’t much belongingness for any of the family members. The book overall is about the end of their life together at the estate called Rosshalde, an expansive property, a mansion, that seems to have a life of its own. An enchanting but sad read.

4/26/22

Highsmith, Patricia. *The Talented Mr. Ripley, Ripley Under Ground, Ripley’s Game*. Knopf (Everyman’s), 1999 (1955, 1970, 1974).

I don’t usually read “thrillers,” but Highsmith’s work is at least one cut above the usual fare of that genre. She seems to portray the amoral person with great empathy and understanding. And her handling of plot seems impeccable. Mostly, these novels are to be enjoyed like a cup of tea and large bit of Danish. Bon Appétit.

4/26/22

Von Planta, Anna, ed. *Patricia Highsmith: Her Diaries and Notebooks*. With an introduction by Joan Schenkar. New York: Liveright, 2021.

This more than fifty-year compendium of Highsmith’s 8,000 pages of diary and notebook entries is a stunning read—particularly if you savor the voyeuristic practice of reading someone’s private thoughts. Her diary entries are brutally honest about everything from her current girlfriend(s) with whom she is madly in love to resentments toward her mother, estranged father, and stepfather. Though bright enough to graduate from Barnard, she never quite masters the art of achieving a meaningful love relationship; her tone seems the same for fifty years. *I can’t understand why this relationship has failed*. And yet, I believe she does know why: her profession requires much alone time, which is not compatible with a needy lover.

Her notebooks, on the other hand, are about her current and proposed works, sometimes a poem here and there. She also talks business. About her agent(s), once her sales go international. Her publishers. Friendships, lasting ones at that, with a broad range of writers. Strong female writers (mostly part of a lesbian group of professionals) mentor Highsmith on how to navigate the heady waters of being a single woman sometimes writing about being queer. Early on, when she is young,

she has sex and “love” relationships with a few men, but none of them is every satisfying. What may be most fascinating is to watch how her life and living influence particular books. The Ripley series of five novels has such an authentic, European backdrop because besides being multilingual, Highsmith *lives* in Europe much of her life. Still, having been born in Fort Worth, Texas, she does return there to visit once her parents move back from New York. Yet she harbors deep resentments against her abusive mother, who lives to be ninety-five (PH nearly perceives it as a punishment), and, because of her own health problems, fails to visit upon her mother’s own funeral. A sad but triumphant ending for a triumphant but oft-times sad and lonely life. If readers have time, it is well worth theirs to read these 1,000 pages, especially if they’re curious about the writer who authored *Strangers on a Train* and the Ripley series of five novels, a total of thirty-two books.

4/27/22

Ackerley, Joe Randolph. *Hindoo Holiday: An Indian Journal*. With an introduction by Eliot Weinberger. New York: NYRB, 2000 (1932).

As a young man in his thirties, Ackerley visits India for a protracted amount of time. This book is essentially his diary of what takes place. As out as he can be for his time, Ackerley has no problem stating his admiration for a handsome man. He is not, however, a typical British tourist. He lives the life, hiring a young man to tutor him in the language. The man turns out to be more of a pest, always conniving to extract money or favors from Ackerley, like a pesky dog begging for scraps. But Ackerley learns enough to get by. He also learns the intricacies of the Hindu religion, finding, as with Christians, that some people practice it with a certain flexibility or laxity. A still entertaining book these many decades later.

### May: 5 Titles

5/14/22

Turner, Nancy E. *These Is My Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine, 1881-1901. A Novel*. New York: Harper, 1998.

This book has remained unread on my shelf a long time, I think, in part, because I would always be put off by the apparent poverty of the title. It belies the intelligence of the narrator and story she has to tell. Set in mostly late 1880s of the Arizona Territories, the novel relates itself in the form a diary, a twenty-year period in the life of a young woman, the man she marries, their children, and almost all related family members. While the frontier adventures are exciting (some unique and some exactly like those found in earlier books), the novel may be limited by two factors. One is the author’s use of first person. Readers mostly receive Sarah Prine’s take on things, a bright but uneducated (for a while) youth. The other may be the form of using a diary. Both features seem to limit the amount or kind of information a novel can tell. On the other hand, the author makes good use of both methods to tell this tale of a young woman faced with many pioneer-like challenges: extremes in weather, battles with natives, sexism, childbirth, premature deaths in the family, and more. It offers a personal touch the third person might not. The diary format strengthens the female point of view which may be lost or obscured by

male writers of similar historical fiction or literature. I still believe shelf appeal might have been increased by at least straightening out the grammar of the title. How about *These Are My Words*?

5/16/22

Eribon, Didier. *Michel Foucault*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991

Reading outside my field, I found this a challenging but rewarding study nonetheless. **“Foucault was fond of quoting René Char: ‘Develop your legitimate strangeness’”(x).** I would say that Foucault probably achieves this goal throughout his lifetime. Although he does not reveal his homosexuality until the 1960s when it is more acceptable, after he does, it becomes a part of his personal philosophy. Author Eribon briefly mentions the names of two men with whom Foucault has long-term relationships. The book is much more about his academic life than his personal life.

Foucault moves from the Communist party to becoming a mere socialist to going as far to the Left as he can in political life. No matter what university he may teach for, he is always unapologetically political, and over time the following issues become, in France, his most targeted issues: courts, cops, hospitals and asylums, schools, military service, the press, television, and the State. His thinking on prisons is prescient for the entire world. Even in 1971, he articulates the evils of a strong police system. Even citizens-at-large who are not incarcerated are, according to Foucault, prisoners.

Over his lifetime, Foucault publishes at least a dozen books and countless articles, many translated worldwide. His work in the area of sexuality, alone, is held in high esteem. I plan now to delve into those books that are translated into English. It will be a slog.

5/19/22

Doty, Mark. *What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life*. New York: Norton, 2020.

This alternately erudite and yet expressive book is enjoyable on a number of levels. If readers are acquainted with both Doty’s prose and poetry, they know that not a word is out of place or mischosen in any way. Doty’s book is divided into five parts each exploring a facet by which readers might find a way into Walt Whitman’s era, his life, and his poetry. It might be used as a textbook for teaching Whitman, at least as an ancillary source. I am now inspired to go to my shelves and reach for that volume of Whitman, whose work I have only touched the surface of. Intertwined with Doty’s exegeses of Whitman’s work are bits and pieces of Doty’s own life and how, as his title suggests, Whitman’s life and work have influenced him.

I have only one complaint, and that is with W. W. Norton. I’m not a copyeditor, and I don’t look for typographical errors when I read, but at least ten jumped out at me, from subject-verb agreement to putting a space between text and an em dash to

repeating two words in a row that should not be repeated. One sentence had the verb agreeing with the object of the preposition instead of the actual subject. Pages 45, 106, 115, 134, 150, 154, 174, 231, 254, 269—in case others should like to find them for themselves. These errors are not the responsibility of the author. Shame on Norton—the last independent press in America. To say the least, the company has done better.

5/22/22

Pellegrino, Charles. *Her Name, Titanic: The Untold Story of the Sinking and Finding of the Unsinkable Ship*. New York: McGraw, 1988.

I've been a fan of the *Titanic's* story since I was a child. I read every magazine article, every book I could find on the subject—even as an adult I collected books. I watched every film, fiction or documentary. This book, though dated now in some ways, does combine two strands: 1) the eyewitness details left behind by those who were there to witness the sinking: passengers, crew members, children—always the more interesting narrative, to me. Pellegrino also unveils the thread of how oceanographer Robert Ballard locates the *Titanic's* remains and visits them in a, for the time (1987), innovative “submarine” equipped with cameras. The most astounding part of Ballard's story seems to be that he is so overcome with emotion on seeing the pristine quality of certain artifacts left behind—china, passenger shoes, and other memorabilia—that he has no desire to lift any of it for souvenirs. Rather, he disguises the exact GPS location from journalists and the world, so that the site might remain what it has been since it all came to rest in the icy North Atlantic floor in 1912, and that is a place of memorial. Of course, other parties do locate the ship and make a commercial venture of it, but Ballard's stance must be the higher ground, in a manner of speaking.

5/28/22

Smith, Zadie. *Swing Time*. New York: Penguin, 2016.

I often make marginal notes throughout a novel I read, but I allowed this one to wash over me instead, primarily because I couldn't put it down. *Swing Time* is, in part, a showbiz novel because the narrator, following college, gains employment as a personal assistant for an American pop star ten years her senior, the single-named Aimee. But first readers must learn of this nameless narrator's early life in London in which her best friend (at the time) is also biracial (her mother black, her father white, whereas the situation is reversed for her friend, Tracey). She and Tracey meet in dance class, and Tracey's “pig nose” is highlighted numerous times in the beginning so that one never forgets what Tracey is like, both her looks and her demeanor. She is a slovenly, take-no-prisoners, strong-willed female whom the narrator admires, at least to a point. Though Tracey winds up with the “real” career in show business as a dancer, it is the narrator who, for a decade, at least, derives some status by way of a well-paid and exciting career. The novel makes a big leap when the setting moves from the UK to Africa, where pop star Aimee decides to build a school for children. The narrator is then dragged into a milieu for which she is unprepared. I admire the way in which Smith seamlessly advances the novel with a back-and-forth movement from era to era, from location to location, chapter by

chapter, until readers arrive once again at the present day (2018) of cell phones and social media, phenomena lacking during the girls' childhoods of the early 1980s. The narrator commits one great sin involving her boss, Aimee, and loses her job. She then returns to London to catch up with her mother, a feminist, who has never been the nurturer her father was. A great read that explores contemporary treatment of race, fame, family, and friendship.

### June: 10 Titles

6/04/22

Fey, Tina. *Bossypants*. Audiobook. New York: Hachette, 2011.

If you're a fan already, you'll love this book. If not, you may become one. Fey's biting (yet gentle) wit is delightful, and readers get a lot of inside information about something most of us will never be a part of : show business. Highlights: her wedding trip to Bermuda in which the ship she and her husband are on is deemed inoperative and they must return to New York by plane (her husband loathes flying); Fey's busiest weekend ever, when she films Oprah for a *30 Rock* episode, throws a birthday party for her little daughter, and portrays (skewers) Sarah Palin for the first time on *SNL*—with the aplomb of any gifted teenager who bites off too much but manages to do all three with perfection. She even plays the audio of she and Amy Poehler playing Palin and Hillary Clinton respectively. A great audiobook for a road trip: five hours and thirty-two minutes. Those who pass you on the freeway will wonder what the hell is so funny.

6/04/22

Foreman, Robert Long. *Weird Pig*. Cape Girardeau: SEMO P, 2020.

Reading this book is almost like perusing a graphic novel except, as with most reading, readers must imagine the cartoon images themselves. And it may be less scary that way, for Foreman tackles the satirizing of some tough subjects. Industrial farming, something about which a pig (if it could talk . . . and this one does) would have something to say. Creative writing and the publishing business—awash in their own absurdities. Gun violence—a germane topic right now. The character Weird Pig is basically an asshole, but for some reason, we like him and some of his antics. Why? He may give voice to some of our own discontent, some of our own worst impulses either to straighten out society or blast it all to hell. And eventually, Weird Pig does get *his* in the end, so you wouldn't want to like him too much.

6/08/22

Crawford, Phillip, Jr. *Railroaded: The Homophobic Prosecution of Brandon Woodruff for His Parents' Murders*. Kindle: CreateSpace, 2018.

Full disclosure: I won this Kindle version of Crawford's book by way of a goodreads.com giveaway. I am providing this review because I do believe it is a narrative worth reading.

This brief book is reminiscent of absorbing feature articles I've read in *Texas Monthly*—stories of true crime set in the Lone Star State. As a gay man who has lived in Texas for over fifty years, I felt drawn to this case I'd never heard of before. Woodruff is a nineteen-year-old boy charged with murdering his parents in their home. Crawford displays a fine grasp of the tenuous legal situation for gays in Texas, and he sets up the facts of the case for readers to see that Brandon Woodruff is wrongly prosecuted and convicted. At the very least the teen should be given a fair trial. Throughout the book Crawford makes clear, among others, certain facts. A Texas Ranger from Austin is assigned the case, rather than a local or regional official. This Ranger conducts a smear campaign against Brandon because of his participation in a gay social life and for appearing in legitimate pornographic movies, "evidence" that has nothing to do with the case but which prejudices the jury. The Ranger also fails to take advantage of information that does exist, for one, cell phone records that would indicate Brandon is not anywhere near the location at the time of the murders. By such evidence alone, he could not possibly have committed the murders. While some guilty parties never show any emotion when hearing the news of loved one's murders, reliable witnesses testify that Brandon loves his parents, particularly his father, who has a sympathetic view of his son's homosexuality—and he is beset with grief from the beginning. Brandon's sister, who is more temperamentally bent toward anger and violence against their parents than Brandon, is never fully investigated. What about her whereabouts on the night of the murder? Her phone records? A party or parties who might have committed the murders on her behalf? One suspect, an ex-friend of Brandon's who is vehemently homophobic, lies to Ranger Collins, and Collins conveniently never puts the ex-buddy on the stand at the trial. The Texas Ranger takes the easy way out all around, and Brandon Woodruff, now nearing age thirty-six, still remains in prison, a long life-term ahead of him.

If readers want to help Brandon Woodruff's cause, they can go to the website [freebrandon.org](http://freebrandon.org) to donate and/or sign a petition to be sent to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. This is a wrong that must be righted and soon. Thanks to Phillip Crawford, Jr. for documenting this case in such a decisive manner.

6/13/22

Price, Reynolds. *The Promise of Rest*. New York: Scribner, 1995.

Price has created what, at times, seems like a tedious novel. And frankly, in one sense it is. The story of a young man suffering a slow death, from AIDS, is both tedious and yet breathlessly fleeting. Millions of lovers (in the parlance of that era) and family members (those who didn't shrink from caring) *in real life* have experienced the same tedium that Price re-creates here, and yet once you begin the journey of Wade's slow demise, you don't want to leave him behind. Even though this story is over twenty-five years old, it seems transcendent, timeless. Wade's mother and father who've separated. His lover, Wyatt, who kills himself. Wyatt's sister, Ivory, her quiet yet affirming love for Wade. All of Wade's aunts and uncles. Secrets! Oh, my, this novel is loaded with them, none of which I shall divulge, but all of them are woven together to create a narrative marking an era that has never

really ended—merely shunted aside.

6/14/22

Olson, Lynne. *Last Hope Island: Britain, Occupied Europe, and the Brotherhood That Helped Turn the Tide of War*. New York: Random, 2017.

This book ostensibly is about the United Kingdom and its role in World War II, but its story is so inextricably woven with the war on the continent, as well as U.S. involvement, that it becomes a much larger tale. Author Olson writes history in an absorbing fashion by doing two things. She, of course, follows and reports the facts (spending ten years writing this book), but she also unfurls the story with a narrative flair sometimes missing from history books. She achieves the latter by developing major and minor characters so that they are three-dimensional. For example, with regard to some major players—Belgium, Holland, France, and Norway—she helps readers become acquainted with both the strengths and weaknesses of its leaders: Queen Wilhelmina of Holland, Leopold III of Belgium, de Gaulle of France—as they take refuge in London for the duration. While relating the story of Nazi cruelty and the utter depravity of war, Olson stops to tell “little” stories: that one Czech citizen, Madlenka Korbek, one day grows up to be Madeleine Albright. That fifteen-year-old Audrey Kathleen Ruston, living with her mother in Arnhem, Holland, the site of a major conflict, is so emaciated at the end of World War II that she barely weighs ninety pounds. Nutrition will always be a problem for the girl who is to become actor Audrey Hepburn. Olson quotes Hepburn: **“I still feel sick when I remember the scenes . . . . It was human misery at its starkest—masses of refugees on the move, some carrying their dead, babies born on the roadside, hundreds collapsing with hunger” (387)**. These are the sorts of details that make this book a pleasure to read. One other thread is particularly poignant, that of Brigadier General John Hackett, “Shan,” originally from Australia but serving the UK. He is paratrooper who is shot down and injured as part of the Arnhem conflict. He is taken in by three Dutch unmarried sisters—Ann, Mien, and Cor de Nooij—and nursed back to health for many months until he can return to England. He is so moved by their love and care and their courage that in years to come, he returns to Arnhem again and again; likewise, he and his wife open their home to the sisters in the UK for future visits. They become family. This chapter is titled “I Was a Stranger and You Took Me In.” It is just one of the many moving stories interlaced with the UK’s status as the “last hope island” of the war. I’m delighted I found time to read this book.

6/16/22

Proulx, Annie. *The Shipping News*. New York: Simon, 1993.

This book has remained on my shelf, unread, for far too long! I can’t say much that others haven’t already proclaimed. *The Shipping News* is a National Book Award winner and bestseller. It is every inch Newfoundland. Each chapter begins with an epigraph taken from *The Ashley Book of Knots*, a tome of nautical knots and their purposes, each one illustrative in some way of the chapter content. Chapter One, “Quoye,” tells readers that a quoye is a coil of rope, also the given name of the main character, Quoye (his last name). After Quoye’s first wife, an unfaithful free

spirit, gets her karmic comeuppance by dying in a car accident along with her current paramour, Quoyle takes his two young daughters, leaving the U.S., and returns to the island of his ancestors, Newfoundland. His aunt, a single woman, joins them to help rebuild their lives and hers—in an ancestral house that once was drug across the ice to its present location. No matter how bad the climate may be where you live, Proulx demonstrates that living on that near Artic island is probably worse. And yet there are those who never leave unless it is by way of the sea or the stone cold ground. Be glad you can live this wooly life vicariously through Annie Proulx.

6/17/22

Doyle, Arthur Conan. *A Study in Scarlet*. Kindle [ND] London: Ward Lock, 1887.

06/22/22

Sweeney, Robert L. *Wright in Hollywood: Visions of a New Architecture*. With a foreword by David G. De Long. New York: MIT Press, 1994.

Sweeney relies a great deal on Frank Lloyd Wright's *Autobiography* as well as other sources to tell his story. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the detail given about how Wright constructs his own cement blocks (both plain and with designs) to build houses in Los Angeles during the 1920s. The blueprints, because of their reduction in size, are difficult to read, but there are some beautiful colored plates located at the back of the book.

6/25/22

Chabon, Michael. *Wonder Boys: A Novel*. New York: Random, 2008 (1995).

This beloved novel is well worth reading whether you're a writer (or even a reader) or not. Though the protagonist is a writer/professor, his portrayal of a man seeking to become more human is probably the more interesting narrative thread. Funny, after watching the film version, I kept hearing Michael Douglas's voice whenever I read the narrator's words. Five stars from me.

6/27/22

Ferrante, Elena. *In the Margins: On the Pleasures of Reading and Writing*. Translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa, 2022 (2021).

Each chapter represents a lecture the author presents to various groups. Full of nuggets of knowledge Ferrante has mined from her own writing over the decades.

### July: 5 Titles

7/04/22

Snyder, George. *On Wings of Affection*. Independently published, Lulu: 2011.

7/12/22

McCrum, Robert, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil. *The Story of English*. New York: Viking, 1986.

Even though this book was revised in 2002, I read the original version because it was on my shelves. Although matters with English may have advanced (or not) in the last twenty years, the global story of how English came to be is still a fascinating one. And how it spread to become the most spoken language of the world, often the lingua franca between two non-English-speaking countries, is even more fascinating. However, the one sad fact is that both the UK and the USA, as (largely) monolingual countries, continue to miss out by not requiring their citizens, by way of the public schools, to learn, say, Spanish, so that they might communicate better with their neighbors and all of South America. Something to think about.

7/14/22

Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*. London: HarperCollins, 2003.

*The Opposite of Fate* is a joy to read, I would venture, whether you're a Tan fan or not. The celebrated author modestly shares her wisdom with readers. Wisdom derived from her childhood, the daughter of Chinese immigrants. Wisdom derived from a life marred with tragedy (family deaths, physical violence, and murder of a friend). Wisdom derived from her relationships, family and friends alike. Wisdom derived from her courage to try new things (from joining a rock band made up of other famous writers to escaping from a dangerous flood while camping near Lake Tahoe to traveling to China with her mother). Wisdom derived from her trial-and-error career in writing (as most writing careers may be). Wisdom about medicine as she suffers through a long (and undiagnosed) bout of Lyme disease. The book is composed of essays arranged in thematic sections, and some anecdotes or fragments tinkle like little bells of remembrance from one essay to the next, but you don't mind the repetition because it demonstrates how interrelated all the parts of her singular life are. I wish I'd read it when it was published, but it is still a valuable document in understanding one of our most important American authors.

7/24/22

Stuart, Douglas. *Young Mungo: A Novel*. New York: Grove, 2022.

Think about the worst things that happen to you before you turn sixteen. None of the disasters most people experience are as bad as what young Mungo faces in his squalid life in Glasgow, Scotland. And as readers, we live it with him, the mother who both loves and neglects Mungo, the bright sister who has a chance to escape the "housing estate" where they all live in a certain squalor, the bully older brother who tries to toughen up Mungo so that he can survive this life without a father. The mother, whose intentions are not entirely clear, because she is often drunk, sends young Mungo on a weekend trip with two known sex offenders, one old and one in his twenties. This is the strand of the story that grabs our attention most perhaps. In alternating chapters, author Stuart seamlessly weaves this story with Mungo's falling in love with a neighbor boy his age. The scenes in which they engage are some of the most authentic I believe I've ever read concerning adolescent love. Mungo is

Protestant, and his friend James is Catholic. Their differences threaten to tear them apart at several points. Mungo's appellation is no accident. He is named after Saint Mungo, and he is often called to the front of a classroom to read aloud about the myths of Saint Mungo. His favorite myth is the one in which Saint Mungo brings a robin back to life. It is this motif that is reflected later on in young Mungo's own story, but I'll let readers discover it for themselves as they devour this important novel about who the weak and the strong really are.

7/31/22

McGuane, Thomas. *Gallatin Canyon: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 2006.

Ten stories—some powerful, some subtle, and some that are both—which are stimulating, to say the least. In one of my favorites, “Ice,” McGuane establishes a thin connection between a coach's wife and the school's drum major, but enough to realize what the illicit situation is. “North Coast” is a strangely positive story about using drugs. And “The Refugee”—a fifty-seven-pager—seems to be about a man on drugs who takes his own sailboat (sans motor) across the Gulf of Mexico in search of a woman he used to know in Key West. If you're a landlubber like me, there may be a bit too much technical argot as he encounters rough seas in every regard, but it certainly reads authentically. McGuane's ten stories and their characters seem to hail from all regions of the country before that one dip into the Caribbean, and every one of them rings true with a certain sophistication of Americans whether they live in Montana or Massachusetts. You just can't fool a local.

### August: 8 Titles

8/02/22

Sparks, Muriel. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1999 (1961).

If one has seen only the movie version of this book, a fine work in its own right that premiered in 1969 with the inimitable Maggie Smith starring in the main role, one might be lulled into thinking the book to be quite similar. One would be wrong. This short novel set in 1930s Edinburgh, Scotland, impresses me as being an extended prose poem about an intelligent and nonconformist teacher who is yet rather naïve. Brodie eschews the prescribed school curriculum to lecture her female pupils concerning a wide variety of cultural and artistic topics, and yet when she also embraces the likes of fascist leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler, she reflects either a certain naivete or an intellectual dullness. The word “prime” or phrases containing that word appears more than thirty times throughout these brief pages; the phrase “crème de la crème” more than five. Both have a rather fatuous ring to them, “prime” referencing Miss Brodie's heightened sense of her own refinement and knowledge, and “crème de la crème” indicating the girls she has rather commandeered to follow her—not just for the year they are in her class but for their entire lifetimes: they are the “Brodie set.” Spark's structure is an omnisciently meandering one in which she may speak of one child in her adult future, one dying prematurely, another becoming a nun. Very lightly Sparks inserts that the year is 1931 or 1937 or that Ms. Brodie is now forty-three. One knows

where one is at all times as if the novel were a sort of hologram. Young Sandy is the only pupil who sees through Jean Brodie's ways, and early on readers learn that she will bring Brodie down. In the last scene of the film, a wounded Brodie who has been released from her teaching position because of Sandy's actions screams the word "Assassin!" after her beloved Sandy, but the book ends rather quietly when readers visit Sandy upon her adult position in a nunnery. When asked about her childhood influences, she simply says, "**There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime**" (137).

8/07/22

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Choke*. New York: Random, 2001.

An odd but enjoyable novel. Victor Mancini, in order to pay for his mother's expensive stay in a nursing facility for Alzheimer patients, "earns" money by pretending to choke in expensive restaurants. Many of the persons who "save" him (everyone knows the Heimlich) somehow feel they must send him money. In a real choking situation it would seem as if the "savee" would feel indebted to the person who saved him and pull out a checkbook. As I said, odd (what am I missing?). Otherwise, the book is a fine satire of American life. When not visiting his mother, Victor attends sexual addiction workshops (modeled after AA, rule #4, i.e. make amends with everyone you've ever offended), albeit to pick up women. His day job is to work in a colonial theme park replete with period costumes, where he works with a good friend, Denny. Palahniuk's structure may seem loose to the reader, but it's really quite tight, a fine layering and fitting together of the novel's plot points. A fun but also serious read—not really aging over the two decades since publication.

8/09/22

Clark, Heather. *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Knopf, 2020.

This impressive biography of the famed poet may be the most comprehensive literary biography I've ever read. Clark, who took more than ten years to write this book, utilizes a broad range of sources, including Sylvia Plath's diaries, letters (some never before seen), journals, and poems. Clark also includes the story of Plath's famous poet husband, Ted Hughes. It would be like telling the story of one conjoined twin without including the other; that is how inextricably woven their lives are, right up to Plath's infamous suicide, in 1963. The acknowledgement page and Clark's notes section are filled with other sources, having visited England to conduct research as well as interviews, and having combed U.S. libraries from coast to coast. The book reads more like a novel, achieving a fiction-like narrative arc. We learn of Plath's early childhood, the loss of her father, her dominating but generous mother. We learn of Plath's education, particularly her four years at the prestigious Smith College. We learn of her creepy attempt at suicide, almost succeeding, when her near-dead body is discovered in a crawl space beneath the family home, her electroshock therapy at a draconian institution in Massachusetts. We cross the Atlantic where Plath continues her education at Cambridge University, where she meets her match intellectually as well as future husband, Ted Hughes. This narrative continues to build as we learn of her struggle to cope with a

male dominated literary life in London. She is alternately elated and deflated as some of her work is accepted with accolades and “her best work” rejected by the likes of the *New Yorker* as well as prestigious English journals. It would have been a mistake for her to eschew her British education because the Brits seem, at times, more open to her raw style than the Americans. We live through the Plath-Hughes tempestuous marriage and become acquainted with their two children. Plath’s death comes with fifty pages to go. It is the climax, all right, but it is not the end of Plath’s story. All throughout the biography Clark intersperses lines from Plath’s and Hughes’s work to demonstrate not only biographical elements but fascinating literary observations, as well. But even Plath’s death is deconstructed in such a way that we may understand it differently from earlier biographies (Anne Stevenson’s “famously negative” one, for example). With twenty-twenty hindsight, we see that Plath’s suicide (as many are) is mere minutes away from being another failed attempt. Plath is always, in the damp English climate and because she runs herself ragged, having bouts of a cold or the flu. As a result she takes a number of OTC medications, as well as a merry-go-round of prescription drugs, including antidepressants, sedatives to sleep, other drugs to wake her up so she can work—all of these interacting horribly as a perfect storm to help end her life (some experts understand that those particular antidepressants may have intensified her depression before finally kicking in). And it isn’t as if she doesn’t try to live. She consults doctors and psychiatrists galore. She corresponds with an American psychiatrist across the Atlantic. She fights like hell to stay out of British psychiatric wards because she is terrified she will be subject to shock therapy again, which she believes, has altered her brain and her life forever. For fans or nonfans alike this biography is a must-read. It generously takes all we knew about Plath before, all the research that has come earlier, and adds or even convincingly contradicts a great deal of the old. I can’t see any biographer attempting to top it for a long time to come. Indeed, the book may finally put Plath to rest alongside her grave atop a lonely spot near where her husband grew up near Heptonstall, a simple granite marker worn down now by nearly sixty years of inclement weather.

8/14/22

Sacks, Oliver. *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*. New York: Vintage, 2007.c

This book describes the many gifts and favors that music visits upon the human brain, from “normal” people to those afflicted with debilitating conditions or diseases. Music can have miraculous effects on all our lives!

8/15/22

Barrett, Colin. *Homesickness: Stories*. New York: Grove, 2022.

This collection contains ten phenomenal stories, mostly set in Ireland. From one about a man who shoots someone in self-defense to a forty-pager about a professional soccer (futbol) player deciding what to do with his life once his career is over, these stories are vibrant with life. What do I mean? They reveal real people in real situations, often ending quietly, with barely a whimper—like most events in our own lives. Yet we recall such situations over and over again with great delight.

8/17/22

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. With a biographical note by Lois Ames. Drawings by Sylvia Plath. New York: Bantam, 1971.

This is my third reading of the novel. I first read it in my twenties, again in my forties, and now as an old man—and after having read Heather Clark’s recent comprehensive literary biography, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*. *The Bell Jar* may be one of the most perfect studies of how one’s biography can be manipulated to produce a novel: the stunted writing career (by way of internship) working for a women’s magazine; the descent into depression and almost successful suicide; a primitive form of electroshock therapy while in an asylum; more (but gentler) shock therapy; the return to a normal life. Much like Plath’s own life. Yet from reading Clark’s biography, I can see that though models for characters have been plucked from Plath’s life, she has, of course, changed names (Dick Newton to Buddy Willard), constructed composites, and in many cases exaggerated the person’s characteristics for the sake of drama. The first half of the novel is full of youthful, piercing witticisms only an intelligent woman could make. I still find that half refreshing. The second half, in which the protagonist, Esther, deals with her depression and treatment, is more difficult, but nonetheless inviting. One gets to descend into mental darkness with Esther without having experience it oneself. Plath, it turns out, may have been a half an hour from living, after her own second attempt at suicide. What a treat for the world it would have been to read more lively, intelligent novels like this one. More poetry.

8/24/22

Wedgwood, Barbara. *The Demon Inside*. New York: Simon, 1993.

A sad but true story. Made sadder by the fact that I attended graduate school with the two principals: Walker Railey and Margaret “Peggy” Nicolai Railey. My young wife (at the time) and I entertained them in our efficiency apartment on the campus of Southern Methodist University. I was both a seminarian where I met Walker, as well as a student of graduate music, where I studied with the same organ professor as Peggy who was enrolled in the master of music program. The couple were about to be married at the time, effervescent and fun to be with. After I left seminary, withdrawing before I graduated, I never saw them again. I only heard of them when their story hit the national news. I had left the church and divorced my wife, leaving the seminary life far behind. They were figures I no longer seemed to know.

I was aware of this book when it came out, but I was not interested in reading it at the time. Somewhat like learning about the Clutter family in the news (I grew up in Kansas), I had grown tired of hearing about whether Walker Railey had strangled his wife of ten years or not. In that she didn’t die as a result of the attempt but remained an invalid for more than twenty-five years, dying at the age of sixty-three, she remained frozen in time for me: a pretty, intelligent and gifted musician. Witty and with a mind of her own.

I read Wedgwood’s book with a wary eye when I noted in her foreword that she was a Dallasite who had grown up in the city’s First Methodist Church located

downtown. Even though she'd left the area to pursue a more global career and life, I wondered how objective she might be. She also knew or seemed to know of many of the principals in the story: other Methodist ministers and spouses, Methodist bishops, and the like. But for the most part, I was impressed with her fanaticism for detail, almost too much at times (offering much more than a thumbnail sketch of minor characters, for example). All the dialogue, she claims, is lifted from **“sworn testimony, quotations from newspapers and magazines or the recollections of two observers of a scene or one of the participants in a dialogue” (xi)**. She allows for the mistaken or distorted memories of people when recalling even such a traumatic event as this one.

But one element is missing. Facts. Walker Railey consistently refused to speak with law enforcement, except briefly, all the while claiming he was innocent. And, of course, Peggy Railey could no longer speak for herself—nothing more than a drooling ghoul the strangler had created the night of the attack. One time, early in her time at the Dallas hospital, she “woke” momentarily from her coma, ostensibly upon hearing the voice of her husband standing at the foot of her bed, and seemed startled. The older child, Ryan, five, had suffered some injury, the attacker apparently pushing him away from the scene, but he was too young ever to positively identify the violent intruder. Those events may be as close as the public ever gets to knowing the truth. A strange and lurid case made markedly so because it takes place within the context of one of the country's largest churches of one Protestantism's most established denominations. As the title suggests, the demon remains within, within the realm of its own story, perhaps never to be set free.

8/29/22

Nava, Michael. *The City of Palaces: A Novel*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014.

“The City of Palaces” is a nickname for Mexico City. This historical novel is rich with Mexico's troubled yet textured history but rich also with carefully drawn characterizations, as well. Nava's clear prose conveys not only an elegance difficult to match but also conveys the nuanced difficulties of human relationships. In Book 1, “The Palace of the Gaviláns,” (1897-1899) readers learn of an aristocratic dwelling that is now 300 years old; with its antique condition yet filled with significance for its family, it plays a substantial part throughout the novel, almost always a haven from violence or disruption. Readers learn of the love of a man for a woman whose looks are marred by a childhood bout with small pox. Even so, their respect for one another and their common interests allow them to marry. Their love deepens over time, spurred on by a strong sexual attraction for each other. They have one son, José, whose sensitive reflections and interests become a primary focus of the novel.

In Book 2, “The Apostle of Freedom,” (1909-1911), the novel skips through time to when the boy, José, is almost a teen. It is a time of political turmoil, as one man attempts to win the presidency by being in favor of democratic freedoms. Jose's parents, his father an MD, his mother a volunteer nurse for the poor, work to support this man and help to get him elected. It is only the beginning of more trouble.

Book 3, “Tragic Days,” (1912-1913), unfurls the turmoil that occurs when this new president is ousted by force after a short while, thus altering the history of Mexico forever. Overall, the novel is a fine examination of this period of Mexican history, its difficulties with the indigenous populations (Aztecs being one), its lack of care for the poor, and its Spanish colonial and cultural traditions—a proud people whom Americans should know and care more about. By way of this story set prior to the Mexican revolution, readers have much to learn about our neighbors to the south.

### September: 5 Titles

9/01/22

Sedaris, David. *A Carnival of Snackery: Diaries (2003-2020)*. New York: Little, 2021.

Much like Sedaris’s first journal, this one contains a mixture of “Dear Diary” items along with jokes people tell him, along with long anecdotes about people he knows, along with a certain political polemic (which I love), and more, like overheard conversations in public places. If I were teaching creative writing, I would lift portions of both of Sedaris’s diaries to demonstrate how writers can mine their own diaries for topics or scenarios for other works.

In the early part of his first diary, Sedaris is a poor writer. In this one, he is somewhat more solvent and becoming more so all the time. Now, the man is so busy with readings and lectures, he’s always on a plane, and the airport world alone must offer up some of his richest observations. His dated entries from all around the world show a man who is interested in people, what makes them tick, what makes them say the things they do. Not that he always understands, but he is curious enough to record some of the ridiculous, confounding, or even wise things they say to him. Overheard conversations. How his day has gone, if he’s at home in one of two or three dwellings he owns in England or France. How the day has gone for his husband, Hugh. Jokes. Yes, plenty of jokes people take pride in telling him at one of his readings as he is signing books.

**“A guy finds a genie who grants him three wishes, adding that everything the man gets, his wife will get double. ‘Great,’ the guy says, and he wishes for a big house. Then he wishes for a car. Finally, he says, ‘Okay, now I want you to beat me half to death” (211).**

**“It’s night, and a cop stops a car a couple of priests are riding in. ‘I’m looking for two child molesters,’ he says.**

**The priests think for a moment. ‘We’ll do it!’ they say” (445).**

Sedaris’s title is derived from this tidbit dated March 23, 2013, London: **Frank and Scott went to an Indian restaurant the other night and took a picture of the menu, which offered what is called “a carnival of snackery” (289).** Indeed, that’s what this book is, and the delightful thing is it doesn’t cost you one calorie to consume!

9/09/22

Egan, Jennifer. *The Candy House: A Novel*. New York: Scribner, 2022.

This nonlinear novel, similar to Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, is at once fascinating and thrilling, yet challenging to grasp—for me, anyway. As with a roller coaster ride, one must climb aboard and suffer whatever curves come your way. Her title seems to be derived from the following:

***Nothing is free! Only children expect otherwise, even as myths and fairy tales warn us: Rumpelstiltskin, King Midas, Hansel and Gretel. Never trust a candy house (125).***

The narrative, which begins in 2010, ventures freely into the mid-2020s and back, centers around children born in the 1980s. One Bix Bouton—akin to a real life Steve Jobs—develops a technology he dubs Own Your Unconscious which, to borrow text from the dust jacket, “allows you to access every memory you’ve ever had, and to share your own in exchange for access to the memories of others.” Like Facebook, from a slightly earlier period, OYU seduces a large portion of the world’s population into its powers. Always be careful what you wish for, Egan’s title seems to caution us, because you might not like what you ultimately wind up with. This idea of knowing all of your thoughts is just like sighting a candy house. You won’t always be able to trust what you find inside.

9/21/22

Davis, Jeffrey. *Tracking Wonder: Reclaiming a Life of Meaning and Possibility in a World Obsessed with Productivity*. Boulder: Sounds True, 2021.

I read this book twice. The first time, straight through without completing the exercises in a Tracking Wonder notebook I set up using a spiral (however, penciling in “NB” where there were exercises to complete). The second reading I did note the items I had marked “NB,” I completed the exercises, and I found them enormously helpful in generating renewed creativity.

My own writing had become rather stale. I couldn’t seem to get out of my rut. Davis helps readers develop a refreshed awareness of the world. Perhaps the most helpful feature that Davis generated for me is the concept of our “young genius,” the child-like persons we all were at age seven. Few rules governed us considering our creativity; we didn’t edit (poo poo) our ideas. It is this Young Genius that Davis’s book seeks to unleash in every reader (or participant in his workshops). His ideas can free that young genius inside each of us, whether we are a writer or artist or CEO or manager of a retail store. There are always more creative ways to do things or work or live our lives without worrying about being “obsessed with productivity.” A must-read for anyone who wants to freshen up their personal or professional lives.

9/21/22

Patchett, Ann. *The Dutch House: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2019.

If readers want to ascertain the entire plot of this novel, they can consult Wikipedia; it's otherwise too complex and contains too many spoilers. Danny Conroy, who happens to have graduated high school and college the same years I did, narrates this engrossing but compressed epic about him and his sister, Maeve (in my head I keep seeing the beautiful Maeve character created by Emma Mackey in TV's *Sex Education*). The brother and sister experience a sort of orphanhood when first their biological mother leaves them as young children—to serve as a missionary in India. They experience it again when their father dies and their truly wicked stepmother banishes them from their home, the Dutch House of Elkins Park, Philadelphia—the home built in 1920 and probably serving as the central character of the book. Both times, the siblings must serve as parents to each other because they simply have no one else (except for three kind servants who have no legal authority). This intimacy is both helpful and harmful to them: Maeve never marries, and Danny's wife always feels she's competing for Danny's attention. Danny's role as narrator is similar to the role that Nick Carraway takes in *The Great Gatsby*, except that Danny's account is more or less reliable, marred perhaps only by depending on his childhood memories which, in many cases, are distorted by the hurt of abandonment. In all, the novel is a satisfying read, worthy of its nomination for a Pulitzer. It is one of those you could sit up all night reading and fall asleep in the morning quite satisfied, book clutched to your chest.

9/22/22

Peery, William, Ed. *21 Texas Short Stories*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1954.

These twenty-one stories written by Texans (either by birth or by successful transplantation) were published between the early 1940s and the mid-1950s. But many of them chronicle earlier times, calling to mind rural-agrarian, nineteenth century Texas, calling to mind Texas's involvement in the Civil War and slavery. Editor Peery features some famous names: O. Henry, Katherine Anne Porter, J. Frank Dobie, and Fred Gipson. But he also includes many fine writers who do not possess that kind of fame. Margaret Cousins, for example, may write the best, non-sentimental Christmas story I've ever read. "Uncle Edgar and the Reluctant Saint" tells the tale of a little girl who almost doesn't get to celebrate Christmas with her family due to her train getting stuck in a freakish Texas snow storm. Her curmudgeon of an uncle happens to be on the train, a man who detests marriage, Christmas, and almost everything else part of civilization. He manages to come through for her and everyone else on the train without changing his character too much. All the stories reveal diction and dialog that are no longer used (probably), sort of Huck Finn meets the Texas State Fair. Worth the time, especially if you are interested in Texicana.

**October: 9 Titles**

10/11/22

Byrd, Bobby, and Johnny Byrd, editors. *Lone Star Noir*. New York: Akashic, 2010.

These fourteen stories, though set in the singular locale of Texas, are about the same things that noir is about in the other forty-nine states: avarice, greed, murder. Thus, making the collection rather universal. Divided into three parts—rural Texas, urban Texas, and Gulf-Coast Texas—each story brings to life those three qualities. Noir allows readers to experience this thrilling but illicit word vicariously so that we never ever have to commit such crimes ourselves. Title is part of the Akashic Noir Series.

10/11/22

Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. New York: Random, 1988.

One might wonder how the story of a single man might also tell the complete story of a war that that man participates in. Yet that is precisely what the late journalist and author Neil Sheehan does in his award-winning book, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. John Paul Vann might be a larger-than-life character if indeed he were a larger-than-life person. He is not. And Sheehan takes great pains to explain to readers Vann's poverty-stricken childhood, one in which Vann (his adopted name) is born out of wedlock and would rather take the name of his stepfather than the name of the father who brings shame upon him (although he does become acquainted with the man later). Vann begins his wannabee *life* by earning a good education. He is always about self-improvement as far as his career is concerned and seeks more degrees even while working full time. At a personal level, Vann remains a mess for the remainder of his life. His early poverty, the rejection of him by his mother, always plays a role in his judgment.

John Paul Vann commits a crime he ultimately gets away with (he does no jail time) because his wife testifies on his behalf and because he *teaches* himself to beat the military's polygraph machine—another blemish on his larger-than-life image. Yet the existence of this trial dogs him as he attempts to climb the military ladder of success via the back door (certainly not West point). Vann places career before his wife and children. He allows his voracious sexual appetite (as many as three acts of coitus a day in his forties) commands him to do whatever necessary to satisfy it: lie, cheat, manipulate. He all but divorces his wife (and children) to accommodate his promiscuity, keeping secret from each other the lives of his Vietnamese lover and (illegal) wife.

Yet all the while Vann possesses an honest and accurate perception of the Vietnam War beginning early on in the 1950s. He perceives that the U.S. military complex, since its recent victories with World War II, develops an arrogance that keeps its leadership from assessing the Vietnam War honestly. Army leaders refuse to learn anything about Vietnam: its centuries-long battles to fight off (successfully) foreign invaders. It refuses to realize that South Vietnam government is weak and corrupt and as such never fights the North with full force. It refuses to realize that the Vietnam people are one and that often the enemy looks like the ally and vice-versa.

The Battle of Ap Bac, in 1962, is one in which everything that can go wrong does go wrong—the American Army losing hundreds of lives in spite of its military “superiority.” The Viet Cong (North Vietnam Communists) capture abandoned U.S. equipment, expensive weaponry, and use them against the South supported by the U.S. military. Military leaders fail to realize Vietnam is one country, that it cannot be divided as North Korea was. The people pass back and forth over the imagined line of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel undetected. Vann ultimately believes that how Vietnam determines its future ought to be up to its people, a struggle that, even if it turns to Communism, is not the business of the United States. There is no such thing as the so-called Domino Theory. The lives and money being spent for nearly two decades are a wasted expense, to say the least.

And yet, Vann, up until the very last of his career, continues to believe that with his superior leadership, the war can be won—even after the Tet Offensive and other failures. In June 1972, unable to obtain the service of his usual helicopter pilot, Vann makes an ill-advised night flight in fog with an inexperienced twenty-six-year-old pilot and all occupants crash to their deaths, Vann believing until the end that he has won the war. It will not end, of course, for several more years, in 1975, when the U.S. finally admits defeat and vacates the decimated country.

10/16/22

Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. With an Afterword by Mark Schorer. New York: New American Library, 1961 (1922).

Americans always want more; it is the hunger, always the yearning for more material gain that capitalism engenders. At least, that is what Lewis would have us believe by way of this novel that is now one hundred years old. And yet, despite certain gewgaws that have disappeared and been replaced with more modern ones, the book might have been written yesterday. It’s uncanny how little about consumerism and capitalism have changed, except that the sickness Lewis identifies may have become worse. But George Babbitt’s search for acceptance and his desire to conform to society’s ways in order to gain that acceptance may have changed. Church attendance has steadily declined in the last one hundred years; so has the ubiquity of the two major political parties. Maybe the burnished hard shell of capitalism is cracking, but to be replaced with what? Stick around for the next hundred to see what happens?

10/21/22

Hammett, Dashiell. *The Thin Man*. New York: Knopf, 1965 (1934).

I admire Hammett’s treatment of dialog, perhaps rivaling or outsimplying even Hemingway’s use of it. As the novel is a mystery, a whodunit-detective story, a classic one at that, the narrative depends on such snappy patter to carry it along. Much of that dialog belongs to the famed characters Nick and Nora Charles, the couple made rich by the little woman’s sizable inheritance. Written before perhaps we learned what excessive use of alcohol can do to one’s body, this couple swills it morning, noon, and night—which may contribute to the fast talk. But then there are

the swear words, as well, words we've come to accept in film, but not back then, when the movie version of this book comes out (you won't hear them in those 1940s films). Hammett even employs the N word, coming out of the mouth of a salty police detective. He also manages to delve into sex with this bit of repartee between Nora and Nick:

**"Tell me something, Nick. Tell me the truth: when you were wrestling with Mimi [his ex-wife], didn't you have an erection?"**

**"Oh, a little."**

**She laughed and got up from the floor. "If you aren't a disgusting old lecher," she said. "Look, it's daylight."**

Oh, and the titular thin man is so thin that (I won't spoil the ending) if you don't pay attention to Hammett's use of the adjective throughout, you might wonder how he arrived at that title. Enjoyed reading this master of the genre.

10/23/22

Clark, Elizabeth. *My Exaggerated Life: Pat Conroy. As Told to Katherine Clark*. Columbia: U of SC P, 2018.

I don't usually care for "as told to" books, but this one is too intriguing to pass up. Clark spends a number of years communicating with author Pat Conroy either by direct interviews or by way of written communications. He declares early on that his spoken language is much different from the prose he uses in his fiction. And his fiction (for those who don't know Conroy)? *The Great Santini*. *The Lords of Discipline*. *Beach Music*, to name only a few.

Each book that Conroy writes is his way of transforming the mess that is his autobiographical material. *The Great Santini* is essentially about his bully of an abusive father who cows Conroy's mother and all his siblings. *The Lords of Discipline* is about his four years as a miserable cadet at the *Citadel*, in South Carolina. But his writing is also about his three marriages. His parents. His children. He writes, by the way, *The Water Is Wide*, the novel about a young man who teaches on an island with an all-Black classroom of children—made into a successful movie, *Conrack*, starring Jon Voight. In fact, Conroy makes a great deal of his income from selling the film rights to his works and getting a successful result—a rarity among novelists.

I am much more encouraged to read Conroy's oeuvre, in part, because I can now sense how difficult it is for him to arrive at each finished product. He is one of those persons who must fight for every minute of happiness, every inch of success, and Clark's book relates his story plainly and with great sensitivity.

10/23/22

James, Henry. "The Pupil." Logan IA: Perfection, ND.

This long story is published by the Perfection Form company with the adolescent student in mind. However, I believe it might be one of those stories that said persons would groan at having to read. Even though the narrative, at first, might be intriguing: a young British man is hired to tutor a boy from a patrician and assumed to be wealthy family—a boy who also suffers a vague sort of poor health (later assumed to be heart trouble). The text is peppered with French phrases and other foreign terms—appropriate enough for this family pursues long holidays in France and Italy, Venice particularly—but perhaps a bit confounding to the typical public school student. Yet, as time passes, the tutor must nearly beg to collect the agreed upon pay, and the young boy is quite aware of his parents' treatment of the tutor: it evidently has happened before. The most satisfying part of the story may be that the tutor and boy do establish a warm and trusting relationship, setting up quite a dilemma for the tutor. *Do I stay, or do I go?*

10/29/22

Strout, Elizabeth. *Oh William!* New York: Random, 2021.

"Oh William!" becomes, before this novel is over, rather a poetic refrain uttered by the female narrator, Lucy Barton—a longtime figure in Strout's fiction. Lucy and William marry when they are very young, then divorce after a number of years. They both remarry, and yet both remain in the lives of the children they've brought into the world as well. Strout travels back and forth through time so seamlessly that one is never lost in or by the narrative. It turns out that Lucy, like her creator, is also a successful writer, but Lucy carries a lot of baggage with her. So does William. Poor parenting they received in developmental years. Poverty of various kinds. And it is a good thing that they remain friends because after Lucy's second husband dies and after William is left alone, they turn to each other to help the other through life's difficulties as they age into their seventies. A very affecting book by one of my favorite authors.

10/29/22

Wagner, Sara Moore. *Swan Wife*. San Diego: Cider Press, 2022.

These may be some of the most exciting poems, the most developed poems I've read by a contemporary poet in a long time. Wagner's structure is deliberate, appropriating certain aspects from Joseph Campbell studies to frame her collection. Sure of her technique and subject matter, Wagner ensures her poems pop with energy: they possess a natural, almost childlike quality in their enthusiasm about youthful love, marriage, having that first child. In "Licentious," my favorite passage may be:

**She tells me *come out*,  
someone might see me, the bounce  
of my breasts, this ache. I will have to marry the snake  
slivering into the banks, will have to marry the sun,  
a thick hand on my shoulders (xi).**

Wagner's title may well spring from "Ball and Chain," the moment the persona emotionally becomes the betrothed, the soon-to-be swan wife:

I dipped my toes in and you called me swan,  
you said *you'll go where you want*. It was maybe then I knew you saw  
me, how I wanted to fly or float, to cover. How even a mute swan  
will hiss and attack if you get too close. How you called me beautiful  
then, so beautiful and so loud, the way I'd hoot up to the stars,  
the way I showed my teeth (7).

The poet's persona maintains her controlled ebullience throughout the entire collection, and I hope to read more of Wagner's work. Congratulations to her for winning the 2021 *Cider Press Review* Editors' Prize Book Award. The collection is quite deserving.

10/31/22

Wharton, Edith. *The Custom of the Country*. With an introduction by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. New York: Scribner, 1997 (1913).

Wharton, portrayer of early twentieth-century America, unveils the life of one Undine Spragg who, in time, will marry three men, one of them twice. From the time Undine is a young woman, she is hard to please. She never has quite the clothes she wants, never quite associates with the people she really wishes to. And when someone, like her parents, stretch themselves to make her happy, she is far from grateful. She is like this with each of her husbands, too, the first one an apparent rube from her small New York City suburb. Then, she marries up, a handsome man who might become a poet, but because she doesn't wish to live on his small trust and make do, he must go to work. Jumping to France, she marries royalty, but even he doesn't have enough money, and she leaves him, as well. Finally, she marries the rube again (he just happens to be in France), because since the early days he has become a billionaire. And he gives her nearly everything she can dream of, including a fine home to a little son (by husband two) she has ignored since his birth nine years earlier. She attempts to goad this man into becoming an ambassador (on the book's last page), but when he tells her that she could never become an ambassador's wife because she is divorced, she is furious. Wharton ends the novel this way:

**[Undine] had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife: and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for" (509).**

Wharton's novel, some say, is prescient for its time, predicting what American society might become like. And along with Sinclair Lewis (*Babbitt*) and F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*)—whose novels are published at roughly the same time—she limns what can happen to ambitious women who have no place in society except to be some man's wife.

### November: 7 Titles

11/06/22

Strout, Elizabeth. *Amy and Isabelle*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

I regret that this, Strout's first book, is my most recent one read, after having perused five other Strout books previously. The novel is indeed a tour de force, worthy of premiering a writing career. In it Strout tells the story of titular characters Amy and Isabelle, daughter and mother respectively. It is one of the hottest summers on record in Shirley Falls, a New England town in the 1970s. The site's yellowing river exudes a strong Sulphur smell. No one has air conditioning, and everyone is hot all the time, in every dwelling whether it is at home or at work. Years before Isabelle has come to Shirley Falls with a baby in her arms. Her husband has died, she tells everyone. Now Amy is seventeen, and her mother is youngish, in her thirties. Readers in essence become acquainted with the entire town. All of Isabelle's co-workers in an office where she is the boss's secretary: Fat Bev and a number of other notable characters. There are Amy's school friends, particularly Stacy, who is pregnant, and, being the daughter of two mental health workers, is allowed to have her baby and give it up for adoption. The two friends share lunch each day sitting in the nearby woods and smoking a single cigarette each (Stacy hides them in a Tampon carrier kept in her school bag). They are close, yet there are secrets about themselves they never reveal to the other, things that might make one dislike the other (each fears). There is Amy's middle-aged math teacher, a bearded man, not particularly handsome, but charismatic enough to lure Amy into an illicit relationship. There is the disappearance of a girl about the girls' age from another town, a story that sends shivers up and down the backs of everyone in Shirley Falls. All of these people have ordinary but messy lives, even though the town is beset with an active church life split among a number of denominations. Even so, an undercurrent of unease, perhaps some might say evil, brings all these souls together in a manner that keeps one reading as fast as one can. But one should not read too fast, because by doing so one can buzz by the small and delicious details that Strout plants along the way. Pregnant teenage girl. Middle-age man lovingly seducing his pupil. An ambitious mother with a dark past of her own. Oh, and several adulterous affairs. How could it be a boring narrative? And yet, the novel is not a potboiler in the traditional sense. There is no cathartic ending in which all the bad people get their comeuppance. No real heroes—except in the way that true friends can be heroic to each other. The story ends as satisfyingly quiet as it begins. Yes, after a long, hot summer, where the inhabitants of Shirley Falls are frying in the hell of their lives, the sky opens up and the heavens pour forth rain, providing at last a natural relief. Finally, the characters of Shirley Falls may breathe again. Until the next wave of heat develops.

11/10/22

Hyde, George E. Hyde. *The Pawnee Indians*. With a foreword by Savoie Lottinville. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1974.

One might believe, as I did, that at one time all Native American tribes live in peace before the white race's entry into their world. That would be wrong, according to

author Hyde. American tribes do not have the same strict notion of what property lines might be as European settlers. The tribes who hunt each summer go where the Bison and other game are located. Some tribes are more passive than others that are likewise more bellicose and aggressive. All tribes, including the Pawnees, have subtribal groupings. One really can't say that such and such area belongs to the Pawnees. And some tribes even enslave members of other tribes. Though, before the entry of the white race, there may be enough land for some tribes to live an easy, nearly passive and lazy life of hunting and growing crops, all is not peace and light.

The Pawnees are among these "passive" groups. The men are warriors who hunt for game in the summer—when that is over they like to live a casual life. The women take charge happily of the fields of corn and other crops. The entire tribe travels during the hunts and returns to their farm to harvest in the autumn. The Pawnee do not always have a crop when they return, it being exposed to drought or devastation by insects. Enemy tribes might take what they want and burn the rest. Hyde presents an even-handed view of the Pawnees. They are picked on by more aggressive tribes, and they trust the government agents more than they should. Many agreements are broken or forgotten, even ones put in writing. Agents insist that the Pawnee become farmers, when it is not in their cultural thinking to do so. On the other hand men are warriors, not farmers, and they refuse to learn farming. And while the government actually supplement, say, the Sioux, one of the more bellicose tribes, they, to the chagrin of Pawnee agents, omit or forget about the Pawnee who could actually use government assistance when their traditional ways go by the wayside. In the last chapter of their existence, in the late nineteenth century, they are driven from a reservation in Nebraska by the Sioux and the government's laxity in protecting Pawnee rights, both. They migrate to the south where they join with the Wichitas. Due to disease and "war" casualties, the Pawnee are reduced to a population of 800 by 1890. To their credit and without much recognition, there are fifty-six young men of the Pawnee who serve their country in France in World War I. At the time Hyde's research ends, 1933, he believes the Roosevelt administration is finally **"pouring out funds of very kind for their assistance"** (348). One must believe that no matter how large the amount, it isn't nearly enough to pay back what the Pawnee people have lost.

As a lay reader, not a historian with the proper background, I found some of the reading slow-going, but if one is willing to plow through such an academic work, one's reward will be to learn at least a little about one of our Native American tribes.

11/11/22

Cather, Willa. *The Professor's House*. New York: Random (Vintage), 1953 (1925).

Cather cleverly relates two stories in one by way of this novel set ostensibly near a lake in Michigan. The titular professor is nearing old age and builds a new house. However, he is still emotionally drawn to the one he and his family have lived in for decades. In this older one he maintains a study on the third floor, a place where he can separate himself from his family and do his scholarly work. He shares it with a

woman, a seamstress who maintains the use of dressmaker's forms, almost like two additional people occupying the study simultaneously.

His eldest daughter is a widow remarried to a fine man, but the professor often recalls his late son-in-law, Tom Outland, because they first had worked together as student and professor. Outland, killed in World War I, is quite a scientist in his own right, and leaves a fortune to his young wife. Some feel that Outland owed some of that money to the professor and one of his colleagues for helping develop his ideas.

The second story is one long flashback, in which Tom Outland relates to readers his discovery of an ancient Indian culture, as a young man, a high on a mesa in New Mexico. Becoming acquainted with Tom in this manner, readers may wonder if Tom would have lasted with the professor's daughter, who turns out to be materialistic and superficial, hardly the companion with whom Tom might have wanted to conduct his important research.

The brief third part returns to the professor's milieu, the study in his old house, where he nearly asphyxiates himself by falling asleep with a faulty gas stove left on (in heavy winds the pilot blows out). He is rescued by the dressmaker long in his family's employ, causing him to rethink his readiness to travel to a certain beyond.

11/12/22

Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams*. New York: Faber, 1986.

Moore may be too clever by half (for me, at least). I've enjoyed her other works, am, in fact, a big fan. But I found this novel tedious. And perhaps that is her point to make. Benna, a nightclub singer, is lonely. Lonely in Fitchville, a New York suburb (like Apex City is a suburb in an Edith Wharton novel). Because she is lonely Benna makes up a best friend, Eleanor. Only, I don't realize Eleanor is imaginary at first. Eleanor suddenly materializes on the page, with no background (*we were college friends, taught together*, etc.). I miss the clue! Same with Benna's make-believe daughter, Georgianna (George). Stupid me. Benna has riotous times with these two characters, but some of the humor is only (on purpose?) sophomorically clever—a couple of degrees removed from being a cliché. Most distracting to me, at times, is Moore's habit of using speech attributions that are not close to being a synonym for "speak" (I'm paraphrasing): "she grinned," "she shrugged." My reading comes to a halt when I see errors (at best a flaunting of conventions) like that. Anything redeeming about the novel escapes me. I stop reading, and wonder, *Does Faber even staff a copyeditor?*

11/16/22

Bloom, John and Jim Atkinson. *Evidence of Love*. Austin: Texas Monthly, 1983.

This true-crime book holds a particular interest for me because I attended college with the two principals, Betty Pomeroy Gore and Allan Gore. I stood next to Allan in the a cappella choir, and Betty was born and raised in the small Kansas town where my grandparents lived. Betty and Allan married five months before my

fiancée and I did, so I have some affinity for their story. On June 13, 1980, when we are all in our early thirties, Betty Gore is murdered apparently with a three-foot ax. The last person to see her alive, other than her infant daughter, is her friend Candy Montgomery. Only they aren't exactly friends any longer. According to trial records, when Candy drops by to see about the Gore's older daughter spending the night at the Montgomery house and picking up the child's swimsuit, Betty asks Candy if she is having an affair with her husband, Allan. Candy says no, but when Betty asks her if she *had* an affair with him, Candy confirms it.

The word "yes" begins their long and bizarre story. The two women talk quietly about it, Candy proclaiming that the affair has been over for eight months. This does not satisfy Betty. She leaves the room and comes back from the utility room with a big ax. Somehow the following fracas winds up in that little room. Candy claims that Betty says, "I have to kill you," and raises the ax. Candy's head and foot both receive "minor" injuries, but worse, something in Candy's subconsciousness is unleashed, a rage, and, instead of getting out of that place with her life, she finds herself in a life-and-death struggle for the ax. And when she wrangles it away, she (in echoes of Lizzie Borden) gives her friend over forty whacks—most of them while the victim's heart is still beating.

The story is fascinating, not just because I knew the Gores on a degree of separation of, say, a faded one, but it is universal to many fallen church people. All these people are good Christians, active in their local communities, and still something heinous like this can happen. After evading the police for weeks, Candy is finally confronted and charged with the murder. Her trial, in North Texas's Collin County adjacent to Dallas, is a circus of media hounds, theatrical lawyers, and one recalcitrant and tyrannical judge.

By the way, I read this book the first time it came out. Made not a mark in it. Just read it straight through to get the facts, ma'am, just the facts. This reading, I believe I felt a much stronger empathy for young parents who are dissatisfied with their apparently happy marriages, a better understanding that life is not always black and white. Though the story is over forty years old, it remains a cautionary tale for bored suburban housewives who think that a brief affair might bring them a bit of excitement to their dull lives. And perhaps it is a lesson already learned, for more women than ever are a part of the workforce, lead mostly satisfying lives of work *and* family—as much as any man. In any case, it is a story I shall not soon forget.

11/22/22

Galloway, Scott. *Adrift: American in 100 Charts*. New York: Penguin, 2022.

Galloway takes complex economic problems and concepts and simplifies them so the average citizen (*cum moi*) can understand them. He does so by way of very understandable prose, and, as he says, one hundred charts. His book is written then for two kinds of readers. And all 535 people in congress should be forced to read it. If they understood concepts like "the rise of the shareholder class" an undue "idolatry of innovators," they might act differently. They might actually favor policies that help the middle-class and not the wealthy class, who really don't need

any additional help. Get the book. You might enjoy it!

11/30/22

Wilder, Thornton. *Theophilus North*. New York: Harper, 1973.

Published two years before Wilder dies, this novel plays out in 1926, during what would have been the author's twenties. The episodic narrative is set in Newport, Rhode Island, and it seems that each chapter is composed around a different character—almost a set of linked stories. Almost. The titular character, also in his late twenties, is entranced by Newport's singular history, and he early on describes the “nine cities” he uncovers there. Having served in WWI, he now casts about for something to do with his life. He decides that he will read orally to a variety of people who need his services. And each chapter then becomes one of these adventures in reading. Probably not as structured or as profound as his earlier works, the book does seem a tribute to his youth, and it holds my attention through to the end.

### December: 3 Titles

12/05/22

Mosley, Walter. *The Man in My Basement: A Novel*. New York: Little, 2004.

A short but expansive novel with this premise: An odd little White man seeks out a Black man, Charles Blakey, because he has a large basement that is also windowless and contains only one door. Anniston Bennet's proposition is this: that Charles will lock Anniston up in his basement for a certain amount of time. In return Charles will receive a large sum of money. Charles says no at first, but he reconsiders. Charles has inherited his two-hundred-year-old home, but it is his only asset. He's never worked hard or steadily, in fact, has been fired from a bank for embezzling a small sum of money—thus being blackballed by the rest of the town. So Charles does agree to house the little man in his basement, basically serving as Bennet's master. What follows is a much deeper story than what may think in the beginning. To say more would indeed spoil the read about how these two men come to terms with their pasts.

12/08/22

Saunders, George. *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life*. New York: Random, 2021.

Saunders, if this book is any representation, is a talented teacher of writing. His brilliance as a writer always intimidates me a bit; I'm not sure I understand his own fiction all that well. However, here, as he examines seven stories of Russian writers Chekhov, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Turgenev, Saunders makes very clear through illustration and fine contemplation what it means to construct a solid story. And I use that word deliberately because for Saunders writing a short story is about *constructing* a work of art.

I can't reveal everything he covers, but I can mention several concepts that struck me as being essential. If the reader is a novice writer, you can learn much (bring your pencil). If you've written lots of stories, perhaps Saunders's ideas will be a refresher course for you or bring to light elements you've not considered before now.

One, Saunders is concerned with cause and effect. Each action in a story should be the result of some other action. Why is this character doing this or that? Second, he contends that escalation is paramount—what may cause one to keep reading is that the stakes go up. Each major event should, in a cause-and-effect manner, escalate the story, fire it up, move it along. Third, he makes a simple list of major events for each story, demonstrating to himself how each may lead to the next. Of course, his ideas are not all about plotting; he's ultimately concerned with the characters and why they act the way they do so that readers may get to the human heart of the story. A must-read for fiction writers.

12/14/22

Gaitskill, Mary. *Bad Behavior*. New York, Vintage, 1989 (1988).

This collection, indeed, is full of bad behavior. But aren't most of our lives touched by such deportment? Unfaithful spouses. Ungrateful children. Illicit drugs. And more. My favorite story may be the final one, "Heaven," in which Gaitskill takes material that could be the scope of a novel and compresses it into twenty-eight pages. In what seems like a *mélange* of names—it may be difficult at first to determine whose child belongs to which adult sibling—the narrator just start spilling their story. Each new development (one child runs away, one niece comes to live with the narrator) comes in short spurts, barely a paragraph at times. Yet readers do get a feeling of longevity for this family, the hurts siblings make each other suffer over time, the return of prodigal daughters who now have a more mature understanding of life. Gaitskill proves that such compression can work. Just like watching a basketball team for the first time, one does learn the names of the players and their relationships to each other, or one doesn't enjoy or fully understand the game.

Templates for Bibliographic Entries:

**Basic:**

Last Name, First Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

**Basic with Introduction or Other Component(s):**

Last Name, First Name. With an introduction by First Name, Last Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

**Basic with Introduction (or other component) and book is a later reprint:**

Last Name, First Name. With an introduction by First Name, Last Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication. First published by Publ Co in year.

**Basic with Two or More Authors:**

Last Name, First Name, 2<sup>nd</sup>, First and Last Names. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

**Translation from Foreign Language:**

Last Name, First Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. Translated by Name of translator(s). City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

**Translation from Foreign Language with Other Component:**

Last Name, First Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. Translated by First Name, Last Name and with Other Component by First Name, Last Name. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

**Running List of Books Read Aloud since 2020 (in order read)**

**2020**

1. Eisen, Cliff and Dominic McHugh, eds. *The Letters of Cole Porter* 5/19/20
2. Langella, Frank. *Dropped Names: Famous Men and Women as I Knew...* 7/25/20
3. Shikibu, Murasaki. *Tale of the Genji* 7/27/20 - 11/05/20

**2021**

4. Proulx, Annie. *Barkskins: A Novel* 2/05/21
5. Kendi, Ibram X. and Keisha N. Blain, eds. *Four Hundred Souls* 3/24/21
6. Kawabata, Yasunari. *The Master of Go* 4/06/21
7. Flores, Dan. *The Horizontal Yellow* 5/04/21
8. Wright, Frank Lloyd. *An Autobiography* 7/07/21
9. Raven, Catherine. *Fox and I* 7/30/21
10. Marquez, Gabriel García. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* 8/31/21
11. García, Rodrigo. *A Farewell to Gabo and Mercedes* 9/9/21
12. Mantel, Hilary. *Wolf Hall* 11/05/21
13. Perry/Winfrey. *What Happened to You?* 12/23/21

**2022**

14. Cummins, Jeanine. *American Dirt* 2/01/22
15. Sedgwick, John. *From the River to the Sea* 2/24/22

16. McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian: Or The Evening Redness in the West* 3/30/22
17. Highsmith, Patricia. *Ripley's Game* 4/26/22
18. Doty, Mark. *What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life* 5/19/22
19. Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate* 7/14/22
20. Snyder, George. *On Wings of Affection*. 7/28/22
21. Sedaris, David. *A Carnival of Snackery: Diaries (2003-2020)* 9/01/22
22. Patchett, Ann. *The Dutch House* 9/21/22
23. Wharton, Edith. *The Custom of the Country* 10/31/22
24. Cather, Willa. *The Professor's House* 11/11/22
25. Rodgers, Mary. *Shy* 12/31/22